

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Australian Section) Inc.

Re: Facilities Upgrade to the Shoalwater Bay Training Area Rockhampton, Queensland

Introduction

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was established in Europe in 1915. We are an international NGO in consultative status with the United Nations' ECOSOC and UNESCO. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom also has special consultative relations with the FAO, ILO and UNICEF. This submission is made on behalf of the Australian Section of our organisation henceforth referred to as WILPF. WILPF works for social and racial justice, human rights and an end to wars as a means of dealing with human conflicts.

WILPF expresses serious concerns about a number of issues within the context of the "Facilities Upgrade to Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Rockhampton, Queensland." We believe that the 11.0 million dollars allocated to be spent on this project could be better spent in other areas.

On 9 July 2004, Simulation Industry Association of Australia (SIAA) News stated the facilities at Shoalwater Bay Training Area, in Queensland and the Bradshaw and Delamere Air Weapons Range in the Northern Territory will be further developed and able to be linked with US facilities. Senator Hill, then Defence Minister stated, "Our initial priority will be to upgrade the Shoalwater Bay Facility to support the first Talisman Sabre series of biennial joint training exercises that will be undertaken in 2007." We believe that we are witnessing Australia's further envelopment as an integral part of the United States' war fighting machinery. We take issue with the fact that the present Australian Government is enmeshing us in United States' imperialism and the spread of the military industrial complex.

We are also concerned about the environmental impact on the physical area of the Training Area itself and the surrounding areas. In addition, Indigenous peoples', social and employment issues in the area are also of concern to us as well as the impact of the introduction into the area of many hundreds of US, New Zealand and Singaporean personnel from the Navy, Army, Airforce and Special forces units.

General Comments

While WILPF understands that our servicemen are involved in urban warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan to mention two areas, it is our sincere hope these troops will be withdrawn as soon as possible. We therefore fundamentally question the expenditure of funds to build at Shoalwater "state of the art" facilities and scenarios that simulate urban warfare conditions in which to train our servicemen.

The Australian Defence budget for the 2006-2007 is 19.6 billion dollars with a possible further 2.6 billion dollars if required. This is an enormous amount of the people's tax money allocated to defend Australia when Australia is not immediately threatened. This sum is 9% of Commonwealth spending for this period and an increase of 1.9 billion dollars from the previous year. By comparison, Education, Science and the Arts receive only 21.7 billion and Health and Ageing only 4.2 billion. In the first instance therefore, we seek reassurance that the 11.0 million allocated for the Shoalwater Bay upgrade will come out of the Defence budgeted funds.

According to the Statement of Evidence from the Department of Defence April 2006, the claim has been made that the local community generally agrees with this upgrade. We note that eleven select federal, state and local authorities have been consulted while other community groups have been ignored. It is a fact that there is a significant part of the local and wider community whose objections to the proposed upgrade were not canvassed. The objections of these parts of the community concern lack of information on a number of grounds, particularly lack of information concerning any toxic materials that may be used in training activities. We are aware of the film by investigative journalist and filmmaker, David Bradbury, "Blowin' in the Wind" which brought the worrying issues of contamination in the area and possible health problems to the fore. The use of depleted uranium at the facility would need to be ruled out.

WILPF recognises that employment opportunities gained by local workers will be short-lived only, as the construction will need, and is planned, to be completed by April 2007 to allow for fitting out by July 2007 when Talisman Sabre is due to commence. It is clear that permanent employment will not be maintained for construction workers.

With the impact of more and more personnel on this "state of the art" Urban Assault Range, we are concerned about the possibility of accidents not only during construction but also when the facility is in use, particularly as the use of live ammunition is planned.

The protection of local women and girls from harassment, assault or worse is always at the forefront of our concern. In the case of a crime being committed by military personnel from a visiting participating country, WILPF insists that any charges arising from such an assault should be dealt with in Australia by Australian Courts. In other words, we believe that no Status of Forces Agreement should be negotiated which would allow military personnel from States other than Australia to have any potential charges against them heard by courts other than Australian courts. This should include military personnel from the United States of America.

In our view, insufficient attention has been paid to environmental matters:

"No significant environmental issues have been identified during the development of the Public Environmental Report (PER) or the consultation conducted to date."¹

¹ Dept of Defence, Statement of Evidence to the Public Works Committee re Upgrading of Shoalwater facilities, April 2006, p. 6

The greatly increased use of the whole area - that is the constructing of the upgrade and the greater numbers to be involved in the planned exercises - will have much more impact on the environment than has been officially recognized to date.

This large area has been the property of the army since 1965. Its boundary is in common with Byfield National Park and it covers the homelands of the indigenous Darumbal people.

In addition, the Shoalwater Bay Training Area is inside the already threatened Great Barrier Reef and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Ramsar-listed mudflats and the coastal dunes of Corio Bay and Port Clinton, were important additions to the GBR Marine Park, and were announced in a media release by the then Minister for the Environment, Senator Robert Hill, on 10th December 1997 when he said: "Ramsar-listed mudflats and the coastal dunes of Corio Bay and Port Clinton provide important roosting and feeding habitat for migratory shorebirds and seabirds." This was intended at the time to demonstrate Australia's commitment to marine protection ahead of the 1998 International Year of the Ocean.

Increasingly, the delicate balance that large sea creatures, such as dugongs, inshore dolphins and migratory whales require to breed is being acknowledged. In addition, the impact on the myriad of smaller zoological species, terrestrial and marine, also requires further consideration. WILPF believes that the use of live ammunition, heavy machinery on the land, exploding bombs and noisy sea-going and polluting vessels makes a mockery of this area's status as a national park and reveals gaps in the PER report to date.

The Statement of Evidence from the Department of Defence further states, "Most weapons systems can be employed and integrated using live ammunition." We in WILPF have grave concerns about the proposed use of live ammunition, the possible use of depleted uranium and US nuclear powered ships being involved. We have never had absolute assurances that depleted uranium is not used in such exercises in Australia and the US Navy will not divulge whether or not its ships are nuclear powered. WILPF is totally opposed to the use of nuclear weapons of any kind and we also deplore the use of other live ammunition. We are also concerned about debris from the use of live ammunition that would pollute the land, littoral or marine areas in any way.

In short, we believe that the 11.0 million dollars allocated to this project could be better spent in the long-term interests of taxpayers by allocating the money to training in peace keeping and/ or to training for women in post conflict resolution and reconstruction so that Australia's endorsement of Security Council Resolution 1325 goes beyond rhetoric and has some financial backing.

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