

## Submission to the IPAN People's Inquiry 2021

### THE ENVIRONMENT: SILENT CASUALTY OF WAR<sup>i</sup>

#### BACKGROUND

The Environment – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the globe's intricate web of ecosystems, the balance of Nature all have been dealt severe blows resulting from humanity's activities.<sup>ii</sup> None have been more devastating than organized violence from intra-national conflicts to world wars, from military exercises through to long-term effects of nuclear testing.

This submission highlights how Australia's close military alliance with the United States has inflicted untold 'collateral damage' on the environment both within and outside Australia. With the advent of increasingly sophisticated technologies the impact has become increasingly severe.

Apart from the Frontier Wars fought against the First Nations, Australia has been involved in other people's wars in an effort to stay on side with a great and powerful friend, initially Great Britain. After the fall of (British) Singapore in 1941 we gradually switched across to the United States as our protector. As David Walker puts it, we are 'an anxious nation' a European settlement in a sea of Asian nations.<sup>iii</sup> It is the dilemma of choosing between our history and our geography. There might be a middle road but our leaders have always sought to strengthen ties with our historical past.

World War I left its mark on the environment in no small way: erosion from forest logging to build the trenches, and the crushing of flora and fauna by heavy tanks along the way as well as leaving a trail of soil contaminated by heavy metal, all in support of the 'mother country' in a far-off place.

Among the casualties of World War II, the natural environment of the war zones including species diversity suffered extensively. Aerial bombardment (6 million tons of munitions were dropped) and atomic radiation wreaked havoc on forests, crops and wildlife, and of course human beings, creating millions of refugees. Ruins, sunken ships, abandoned bases await a final "clean up".

Since WWII the further development of nuclear weapons, their testing by different nations in Australia (British), the Pacific (French and American) brought the terrors of modern warfare into closer focus for Australia. The US Bikini atomic experiments vaporized three whole islands. Military industries capable of making nuclear weapons have opened up the possibility of destroying not only local or even regional but global environments. The United States Environmental Protection Authority has classified two-thirds of the thousands of military installations across the country as “highly toxic and dangerous”. And this is before any conflict has occurred.

## THE ALLIANCE

Since the Australia-US Alliance was formalized in the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, Australia has supported US military interventions in many parts of the world. Here we will concentrate on three relatively recent protracted wars: Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. We enter these wars as part-payment to our great and powerful friend in the hope that it will come to our assistance in our hour of need.

## THE VIETNAM WAR (THE AMERICAN WAR)

In the 1950s South Vietnam was at war with the North. In 1962 the United States became involved with the stated aim of preventing Communism from taking over the south. The US asked allies in the region to add their support, to which the Australian government willingly responded without consulting anyone else. Sixty thousand troops, many of whom were conscripts, fought alongside American soldiers in Vietnam. From 1962 to 1971 the use of a toxic herbicide “Agent Orange” was dropped from the air destroying a total of 15 per cent of South Vietnam’s tropical forests and 50 per cent of her mangrove forests, together with crops and other food supplies. Napalm caused horrific burns when used in bombs and was banned as a weapon against civilian populations in 1980. A great blow to both habitat and biodiversity.

The South with all its allies, including the United States, lost the war.

## THE IRAQ WARS

In 1991 Iraq invaded Kuwait and Australia joined an international US-led coalition to liberate the country. Demolition tasks and ordnance disposal were carried out by Australian Navy clearance teams. The then Australian PM, John Howard insisted there would be no “body bags” returning to Australia. So Australian troops were not involved in extremely dangerous operations. But Australia did support what the United States was doing in Iraq on the ground both physically and diplomatically. Within a few weeks allied forces demolished through aerial bombing, several cities in Iraq, destroying their water supply at the source, as well as transport and communication networks and power grids. Iraqi forces released 10 million barrels of Kuwaiti oil into the Persian Gulf, threatening nearby desalination plants in Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi forces also set fire to 732 Kuwaiti oil wells. Soot and sulfur dioxide daily spewed out into the air. Iraq was accused of “eco-terrorism”.<sup>iv</sup>

Twelve years later Australia was one of three allies of the United States to invade Iraq. The reason given was that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), which proved to be untrue. The United Nations did not sanction the war.

This time Australian officers were attached to US planning teams prior to the announcement that Australia would join the US and British actions. Maritime operations included enforcing sanctions against Iraq, then clearing approaches to Iraqi ports for coalition forces. Air squadrons provided escorts for aircraft and tankers, later for U.S. marines. In June 2008 the Australian Army Training Team ceased combat operations, after having trained 33,000 Iraqi soldiers. It is estimated that the cost of the Iraq war to the Australian taxpayers exceeded \$5 billion. The cost of the overall carbon footprint is elusive, but no less significant.

US military emissions tend to be overlooked in climate change studies. The United States insisted on an exemption for reporting military emissions in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.<sup>v</sup> This said, it is well known that the US military is the world’s largest user of fossil fuels, and polluter. Extensive use of small landmines would litter vast areas of Iraq. In 1997 the mine ban treaty was signed by 150 countries, but not by the United States. In 1991 the United States made use of another small weapon, the cluster bomb, some 61,000 of these weapons delivered 20 million bomblets some of which ended up buried in soft soil, and would explode when stood on or

bumped. Since August 2010 over 100 countries have ratified the International Convention on Cluster Weapons.

In the immediate aftermath, another environmental issue arises: what to do with the debris? The city of Mosul alone was left with 8 million tonnes of rubble, some of which is probably still be pollutive, toxic, or radioactive.<sup>vi</sup> Moreover, the allies did not return home victorious.

## AFGHANISTAN

The ANZUS Treaty was invoked for the first time after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Five weeks later the first special forces left Perth “to seek out and destroy al Qaeda”. In 2002 they returned home. However, in 2005 special forces were dispatched again because the Taliban, who had survived the invasion, with the help of some al Qaeda operatives, were trying to prevent an election scheduled for December of that year. The special forces, we were told, were there to help the people to “embrace democracy” and strike a blow at terrorism. As more Australian troops were dispatched and the mission grew, so did the number of deaths on both sides.

For the Allies this was an unwinnable war. Th retreat began in 2012. They left behind a country of 30 million devastated by a series of wars spanning 30 years. In 2005 President Hamid Karzai established the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA). One of the most immediate concerns was the ancient *karez* system, a network of water canals which had survived for 3,000 years. Insufficient resources made it impossible to restore this vital system.

Valuable forests were destroyed. Pistaccio, almond and juniper trees which had been an important food source were “sacrificed” for fuel.

Burning oil tankers littered the mountain passes, their toxic fumes polluting wildlife habitats. The number of migratory birds fell by 85 per cent because of the destruction of the wetlands. Meanwhile the population of Kabul doubled in ten years. Thousands would die from air pollution. Coalition members have tried to create a civil society with tough environmental standards but enforcing the has proven very difficult.<sup>vii</sup>

To quote Amin Saikal,

*It is now time for Canberra to take stock of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan and to question whether it pursued the right strategy – and if it ever had an appropriate end game. Its participation in the conflict illustrates that following the US into every war without a strategic necessity of its own . . . can be futile.*<sup>viii</sup>

Today Afghanistan is once again rapidly coming under Taliban control.

## TALISMAN SABRE

Talisman Sabre is a biennial combined Australia-US training exercise for interoperability in warfare, often including other allied forces. It is designed to train the respective military force elements in planning and conducting Combined Task Force operations to improve the combat readiness and interoperability between the ADF and its allies. This year [2021] New Zealand, Canada, the Republic of Korea, the UK and Japan are taking part in the exercise. France, India and Indonesia will serve as observer nations. The exercise is expected to see the participation of around 17,000 personnel.

The initial justification for these exercises in 2005, was the so-called 'war on terror'. However, with the Pacific Pivot shift of US military forces to the Pacific region, Talisman Sabre and other such operations are aimed at China. Australian government rhetoric critical of China over the past years has led to a widespread anxiety about China in the Australian community.

Talisman Sabre involves thousands of troops on land, sea and air plus warships, fighters, bombers, helicopters and armour and artillery. Local communities are also involved, to a degree. The complex military exercises tend to get bigger every year.

Since its inception in 2005, Talisman Sabre has become a fixture on Australia's military calendar. This year's (TS21) is the ninth collective training exercise conducted in Queensland, Northern Territory and part of New South Wales. It is said that these operations will be in line with "Australia-United States Joint Statement of Environmental and Heritage Principles for Combined Activities" (2005).

However, according to the TS19 Environmental Report Response<sup>ix</sup> there is much in these operations that is cause for concern. Shoalwater Bay Military Training Facility, where much of the action takes place, contains some of Australia's most pristine coastal regions. Here, defence training can cover naval, air and sea units, as well as the capacity to conduct large scale live fire training exercises.

Other waters include the Coral Sea and other habitats for endangered species such as turtles, dugongs and migrating whales. Other areas could have "intangible cultural heritage importance to local Aboriginal people", yet there is no sign that any attempt, has until now been made to identify and protect indigenous heritage has taken place. These areas cover an extensive list of endangered species of flora and fauna which either live or breed there, or where migratory birds spend a significant part of their lives.

All military operations include the use of chemicals, many of which are toxic. TNT, heavy metals including mercury, seriously affect the well-being of whatever they come in touch with. Contamination is a serious spin-off as has been found to be the case in many of the US military sites.

The effects of air and ground pollution from industrial activity can cause whole eco-systems to collapse. Heavy military vehicles and machinery moving around Queensland over land and sea beds can also be lethal.

This brief overview conveys something of the environmental damage that results from the functioning of the Australia-US Alliance. Perhaps it is time for a nationwide discussion where all aspects are scrutinized with specific attention given to environmental costs not only of any conflict in which Australia may be involved, but also the day-to-day operations of Australian military forces. A detailed report could be made available for parliamentary review and public discussion.

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Engaged in peace movement 1973 to 2020. Treasurer/Secretary for many years in Pax Christi Victoria.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon, speaking on International Day 6/11/2014

<sup>ii</sup> Pollution of land, sea and air, deforestation, mono-culture on a large scale, use of fossil fuels while resisting renewable sources of energy and reinforcing the idea that nature is a force to dominate have collectively contributed to Climate Change and Global Warming.

<sup>iii</sup> Cultural Historian David Walker, *Anxious Nation the rise of Asia 1850-1939*, UQP 1999.

<sup>iv</sup> See Leaning, Jennifer *War and the Environment: Human Health Consequences of Environmental Damage of War*, pp 123-137,

Neimark B, Belcher O and Bigger P,<sup>v</sup> “US Air Force fighters during the 1991 Gulf War” in *The Conversation*, 25/6/2019

<sup>vii</sup> *Public Radio’s Environmental News Magazine* “War’s toll on Afghanistan’s Environment.”, Boston Ma, July 11, 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> Saikal, A “Australia closes embassy after misplaced participation in Afghanistan conflict” in *The Strategist*, 3/6/2021

<sup>ix</sup> Taubenfield, Robin “Submission to Talisman Sabre 2019 Environmental Report prepared for *Friends of the Earth*.”

Darley, Stephen IPAN “Background Sheet 4 on Environment and Climate Change.”, 2020.