

**Women's International League  
For Peace and Freedom (WILPF)  
AUSTRALIA**

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**SUBMISSION ON  
ALTERNATIVE COMMONWEALTH CAPABILITIES FOR CRISIS RESPONSE  
19 September 2023**

**Introduction**

The **Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)** is a feminist, non-aligned, anti-war and peace-building member-based organisation of volunteer activists. WILPF brings women together to oppose conflict, violence and global militarisation, and provides a unique space for activists across Australia and globally to work together for peace.

WILPF is deeply concerned about the growing challenges of climate change, disasters, pandemics and emergencies, and the serious complex humanitarian consequences and impacts for communities across Australia, in our region and globally. The need to prepare for increasingly frequent events is urgent, as is the need to step up prevention of further climate deterioration.

**Response to the Discussion Paper**

WILPF's submission responds to a number of points in the 'Opportunity for Reform' section of the Discussion Paper, which are directly relevant to WILPF's particular goal of demilitarization and the attendant need for a fully resourced civilian capacity to respond to diverse crises. The relevant points are:

- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
- What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crises?
- Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?

This submission draws on the WILPF Research Report '*Militarisation in Australia: Normalisation and Mythology*' published in 2020.

**ADF participation in response to domestic crises since 1974**

Since the Darwin Cyclone Tracy response in 1974, Australian Defence Force (ADF) responses to domestic emergencies have increased significantly. During the period July 2005 - June 2013, Defence recorded at least 275 cases of military support provided under the Defence Assistance to the Civil Community agreements. Between 2010 - 2020, the ADF participated in a total of six major operations within Australia. In addition, the degree of involvement by the ADF in domestic emergencies has significantly increased since 2010.

An approximate total of 1,900 ADF personnel from all three Branches (full-time and Reserves), participated in Operation Queensland Flood Assist 2010-2011. At that time this was the largest ADF deployment on record in response to a natural disaster; compared with 700 soldiers deployed in Operation Navy Help Darwin in 1974; about 1,500 in the 1974 Brisbane Floods; and about 800 deployed in Operation VIC Fire Assist 2008-2009. ***In the 2019-2020 Operation Bushfire Assist deployed an historic 8,236 personnel including calling up 2,500 Reserves. This was the by far largest mobilisation of military forces within Australia to that date.***

With the COVID pandemic emerging as a national and global crisis in 2020, there was again extensive involvement of the military in ongoing participation in Coronavirus quarantine enforcement across Australia, with thousands of personnel carrying out the roles of civilians, as security guards and first responders.

***It has become the norm to call on the ADF with each successive crisis.*** In all the flood events covering 5 states in 2022-23, a total of 500 ADF personnel were involved with logistical support. The tasks have included: clean-up of flood damaged waste, transporting evacuated people, welfare checks, delivering critical supplies, delivery of fuel and sandbags, and recovery efforts. ***Most of these tasks could have been handled by civilian services.***

Overall, the Defence Sub-Committee which recently spent two months examining the Defence Department's Annual Report for 2021-2022. It concluded that ***more than 50% of Defence personnel - a significant figure - had assisted in COVID, bushfire or flood relief in recent years.***

### **Legal frameworks for the domestic use of the ADF**

Part IIIAAA of the Defence Act 1903 (Defence Force Aid to the Civil Authority Call Out) sets out Statutory process for Defence Aid to the Civil Authority to protect Commonwealth interests or states and territories against domestic violence as defined by the Act. Part IIIAAA is used in circumstances where the ADF may be required to use force, with the decision to be made by the Governor-General.

Separately, Defence can provide assistance to Civilian authorities where there is no contemplated use of force through the Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC).

Reserve Call Out under Section 28 of the Defence Act 1903 provides additional human resources beyond the permanent force. However, the Reserve Call Out may not be an appropriate mechanism for responding to a crisis and is not tethered to the declaration of a National Emergency.

In 2020 the Commonwealth Government made it easier to use the services of the ADF in domestic contexts. The Defence Legislation Amendment (Enhancement to Defence Force Response to Emergencies) Bill 2020 was used to amend the Defence Act 1903 to streamline the process for calling out ADF Reserves, including for the purposes of responding to natural disasters or emergencies. In addition, it was used to provide ADF, Defence personnel and foreign forces with immunity from criminal or civil liability while responding to civil emergencies and disasters.

The 'Black Summer' Royal Commission (2020) into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made 80 recommendations, some with vast implications for the use of the ADF in domestic events. Among them was the simplification of the Australian Government Disaster Response

Plan and the DACC thresholds, thereby weakening the obstructions and safeguards in place for military intervention in domestic contexts.

### **Increasing natural disasters**

The release of the latest report by the top-level global climate science group, the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* leaves us with no doubt that more frequent and intense disasters like bushfires, floods and droughts are now unavoidable. With the attendant damage to infrastructure, housing, public and community facilities, and disruption to communities and families, costs of response and rehabilitation are going to increase.

Given that climatic events are going to increase in frequency and intensity in coming years, Australia needs a reliable way of preparing for and responding to these events, and not the reliance on ad hoc assistance from the ADF which may not always be available. Given the increasing regional and international security tensions, we assume that the ADF, of necessity, will be concentrating on their primary role as a security force (as recommended in the recent Defence Strategic Review Report 2023).

### **Developing a fully resourced civilian capacity to respond to emergencies and disasters**

The reliance on the ADF to fill the gaps or take up the slack in responses is not practicable, particularly given that the ADF may not always be available. ***The need for a properly constituted and fully resourced civilian capacity***, not simply to respond, but to prepare, in an effectively coordinated way for crises, ***has become urgent for the safety of all*** of Australia's citizens, habitats and environment. The following key elements need to be considered in the development of the ***Civilian Response***.

#### **1. Assessment of services, personnel, equipment and preparedness**

The ***Civilian Response*** should have the capacity to do a full accounting of the services, personnel and equipment needed to respond comprehensively to crises of all types; including a comprehensive understanding of how, when and where resources will be deployed. This will ensure greater preparedness and maximum opportunity to save lives, property and infrastructure.

#### **2. Full review of ADF costings and approaches**

ADF comparative costs for civilian resources across different emergency events and locations should be reviewed and assessed for critical lessons.

#### **3. Review of current civilian capacity and resources**

Some analysis would suggest that much of the necessary civilian capacity to respond already exists in a fundamental form. Initial responses to disasters are carried out by the immediately affected communities and families, sometimes in conjunction with local services such as Country Fire Services or the State Emergency Services (SES).

However, demographic changes across rural and remote areas, particularly the aging of volunteer community first responders, maybe under estimating current capacities, particularly as emergencies such as fires have become even more complex with climate change.

This can be compounded by lack of available trained personnel and proper equipment, and often poorly coordinated efforts in the early crucial stages where lives and property could be

saved. Reports suggest that fewer people are volunteering, partly because of the lack of access to training and equipment.

In addition, at present, the civilian capacity to respond is insufficiently funded, equipped and co-ordinated, particularly in rural areas where, of course, the need is greatest, with a serious under-resourcing of community services which is being challenged in some rural communities where there are multiple complex disaster events across the year; such as fires.

#### **4. Coordination**

The Australian Government Crisis and Recovery Committee (AGCRC) makes a lot of references to high levels of collaboration and coordination within and across all levels of government and with non-government stakeholders, including communities and the business sector but no reference to what steps are taken to ensure the coordination of resources for services beforehand. Coordination seems only to be directed to what happens after an event has begun.

Coordination is crucial, but not just during an event. All the necessary plans, functions and resources need to be put in place beforehand so that all steps to respond can be immediately implemented with all concerned knowing their roles and responsibilities; i.e. who is responsible for the various tasks and at what level; who makes the decisions and at what level.

Legislation and regulations need to be in place before crises occur to ensure smooth functioning of all tasks. These details need to be in place and clearly communicated across partners, and the community more broadly. This will be critical so there is no confusion when an emergency arises and communities affected are not left feeling bereft or that no one is helping them and so that their first thought isn't 'why aren't the military here?'

#### **5. Learning the fundamental lessons**

There are so many lessons that can already be learned from Australia's domestic crises over the last 20 years from all the participants and various reviews and commissions - government and civilian: about roles and responsibilities; strengths and weaknesses; and from the differing locations and perspectives of the key actors throughout the cycle of the emergency and disaster. In addition, Australian civil society organisations and government have extensive experience in humanitarian responses internationally.

Some of the fundamental lessons include: working and understanding the local context; ensuring the agency and ownership of local communities; being mindful of the impact of stereotypes – especially those around gender, disability, ethnicity, age, language, LGBTIQ+; respect; to mention a few.

For example, the climate crisis is not gender neutral, with women and girls experiencing the greatest impacts of climate change, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to livelihoods, health, and safety. Across the world, women depend more on, yet have less access to, natural resources and in many regions, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for care as well as for securing food and water. This includes women and girls facing increased vulnerabilities to all forms of gender-based violence, as has been reported during disaster recovery in Australia across the last 20 years.

***Understanding, learning these lessons and integrating them into the development and practice of Australia's Civilian Response to emergencies and disasters is fundamental to building an effective capacity to responding to more complex emergencies.***

### **'Normalisation' of the military**

Unlike funding for emergency services, the ADF budget is increasing but it is not simply the increased resources being allocated to the ADF that is of concern. It is the visibility and the 'normalising' of the ADF's prominent role domestically and the acceptance of the ADF by the public of this 'normalisation'. The more that military personnel are seen on the streets, at airports, at quarantine hotels or responding to floods and bushfires, the more it seems to be 'normal' for the military to be undertaking such tasks and the more it will be seen as acceptable.

This does not mean that there will not be times when domestic crises are so severe that extra assistance is needed, particularly to, literally, do the heavy lifting with planes and naval vessels. However, the critical question remains:


*Does the normalisation of militarisation strengthen our domestic civil society, or does it contribute to an increased dependency on a well-funded military infrastructure and personnel to address disasters, fires and pandemics to the detriment of developing and maintaining a capable, well-resourced, sustainable and resilient civilian responses across all Australian communities into the next century?*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**WILPF'S response is that is that the Commonwealth Government develop and resource *Australia's Civilian Response to emergencies and disasters, as a matter of urgency.***

1. The Australian Government establish a fully resourced civilian disaster response capability
2. Such a capacity to be fully funded and resourced, including well-trained staff located at a community level
3. Undertake a full assessment of the preparedness needs and availability of resources to meet those needs
4. Investigate how the cost of using the ADF is calculated and where it is recorded
5. Assess comparative costs of using civilian resources compared with use of the ADF in crisis response
6. Build coordination across all levels of government and civil society, in advance of disasters and emergencies
7. Learn the lessons domestic and international; and understand and integrate into policy and practice for greater capacity and effectiveness
8. The use of the ADF in domestic crises be limited to severe situations

#### ***For further information please contact:***

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