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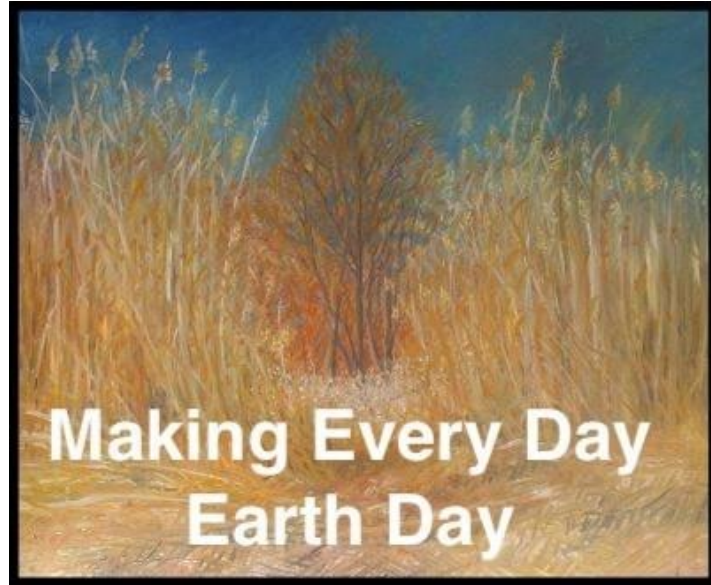
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January 1, 2021

Militarism, Ecology & Health

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“Across the world, the lack of accountability for the harm to the environment and public health caused by conflict and military activities undermines global efforts to help fragile countries recover from armed conflicts.”

- [Widad Akrawi](#), health expert and human rights activist

As the globe's nation-states and non-state actors compete for resources amidst our growing climate crisis, the number of countries experiencing violent conflict is higher than it has been in the last three decades.

In this, our 11th edition, we cover some of the myriad ways militarism impacts ecology and health. The mid-January edition will include visions and pathways to improve international stability and better protect our health, environment, and security by reducing violence. Next month, we will build upon this theme, focusing on the unique challenges of nuclear weapons.

Militarism and Ecology

The threat militarism poses today to ecological and human well-being is unprecedented. In addition to the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons, militarism has greatly contributed to [ecological degradation and climate change](#). Militarism has long been a driving force in shaping our environment through resource exploitation, especially in terms of deforestation.

As major civilizations moved on to other sources of fuel, technology, and building materials, so too did the focus of militarism. Oil and rare metals became sought after prizes that militarism helps claim and consume in an ecocidal cycle of conquer and extract.

The Cold War was the pretext for a string of wars and coups that, together with the International Monetary Fund's role in securing economic reforms and environmental deregulation, opened natural resources across the world to multinational corporations. The resulting neocolonial paradigm had significantly contributed to the sharp acceleration of resource extraction from [27 billion tons in 1970 to 92 billion tons in 2017](#).

"The True Cost of the Military Industrial Complex"

by Charlie Kilman

Today, the U.S. represents the most dominant example of militarism in the world. With hundreds of foreign military bases and a level of spending that outstrips the next 10 nation-states [combined](#), it is the largest consumer of oil in the world and one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gasses (GHG). It is [estimated](#) that the U.S. military has produced 1.2 billion metric tons of GHG since the War on Terror was launched in 2001.

Many governments, supported by powerful corporations, commit ecocide using militarized forces and tactics to occupy, claim, and exploit resource-rich areas, purportedly for the public good. Examples include [Brazil's](#) plans to "develop" the Amazon rainforest and the [Shell corporation's collaboration](#) with the Nigerian military and security forces to quell protests over environmental destruction.

Case Study: The Ecocide and Genocide of West Papua

At the height of the Cold War, Indonesia, which had just proved itself [reliably anti-communist](#), successfully occupied West Papua in 1965 following the Dutch colonial administration's withdrawal. It was supported by the U.S. and the United Nations. There were significant natural resources available, and a friendly regime offered an opportunity to profit.

U.S. mining company Freeport McMoRan was quick to take advantage, culminating in a partnership with Rio Tinto to build the Grasberg mine, the largest gold and second-largest copper mine in the world. Not only did this mine require the decapitation of a mountain held as sacred by native people, but it also destroyed swaths of the most biodiverse forest on Earth with "[one of the world's most egregious examples of tailings dumping](#)." Between the initial invasion, the subsequent [genocidal](#) pacification, and [Freeport's use](#) of the Indonesian military to defend the mine, militarism has underpinned decades of ecological and human suffering in West Papua that [continues to this day](#).

Beyond nation-states and corporations using militarism to profit from ecocide, militarized non-state actors emerge to fight for control of valuable natural resources in states that suffer from political instability. In the Congo, [armed groups have long engaged](#) in unregulated mining and logging in the world's second-largest rainforest.

Inevitably, militarism is a common feature in how police and security forces [target](#) those who attempt to defend the environment from corporate or state interests, as described in our recent edition on the conflict between militarized authorities and local people over water in Northern Mexico. Another recent example closer to home was the militarized response

of [private security firms](#) and [the National Guard](#) to protests by water protectors at Standing Rock in 2016 and 2017.

[One recent study](#) noted that globally, between 2011-2019, almost 20% of campaigns involving indigenous people saw violent reactions from police and security forces. The situation appears to be getting worse. [According to Global Witness](#), 2019 was the deadliest year for land and environmental defenders since they began their yearly reports, with 212 documented as killed. At the top of the list is Colombia, with 64 deaths, forty more than in 2018. The Philippines (43), Brazil (24), Mexico (18), Honduras (14), and Guatemala (12) follow, illustrating the significant threat to land and environmental defenders in Latin America in particular.

These examples are just a taste of what is happening right now around the world at the intersection of militarism and ecology. As climate change worsens and consumption *and* opposition increase, we can expect to see militarism employed with increasing frequency against both environmental defenders and states whose resources are deemed strategically important by stronger powers. These global endeavors are freshly equipped from the almost \$2 trillion of [military expenditures](#) in 2019, representing almost four times as much as global expenditures on [climate mitigation and adaptation](#) the year prior. The opportunity cost alone is untenable, but such direct environmental impacts, as described above, demand that any serious conversation about the ecological threats we now face must address the issue of militarism, and U.S. militarism, in particular, head-on.

Militarism and Health

Healthcare facilities are often targeted in military attacks, particularly airstrikes. In 2019, military forces and armed groups attacked health workers, infrastructure, and patients in [more than 1,200 reported incidents](#) worldwide. Other weapons of war include sexual violence and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. Public health [leaders](#) implore public health and humanitarian actors to consider military violence as public health problems and treat these determinants as other public health risk factors.

After armed conflicts end, many health risks remain in the recovering areas. Landmines and explosive remnants of war continue to pose a challenging threat across the world. The non-governmental organization Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor [found](#) around 3,000 deaths and 4,000 injuries across 50 nations in 2018.

Radiation and toxic waste materials from depleted uranium munitions and military bases have left particularly heartbreaking [impacts in Iraq](#). The near 20-year U.S.-led occupation has resulted in elevated levels of cancer rates, miscarriages, and serious congenital deformities that will continue for generations.

According to the [Cost of War](#) project at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, the costs of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the related violence in Pakistan and Syria include:

- Over 801,000 people have died due to direct war violence, and several times as many killed indirectly.
- Over 335,000 civilians were killed as a result of the fighting.
- Around 37 million war refugees and displaced persons
- Violations of human rights and civil liberties in the U.S. and abroad.
- A U.S. federal price tag of over 6.4 trillion dollars

- An expansion of U.S. counterterror activities to 80 countries

The intersection between militarism, health, and drugs is another area of concern. The "war on drugs" led to the unprecedented militarization of our domestic policing of drug-related offenses. In 2018, there were 1,654,282 drug arrests in the U.S., the vast majority (86%) of which were on charges of [drug possession and use](#). Substance use disorder (SUD) is now recognized as a public health issue not resolved in penitentiaries. Perhaps there is no greater proof than the National Institute of Drug Abuse's estimation that [65% of the United States prison population](#) has an active SUD.

"The War on Drugs: From Prohibition to Gold Rush"

– Jay Z



Throughout 2020, there were numerous instances of militarized police indiscriminately launching clouds of chemical weapons against Black Lives Matter protests, even in residential areas. Predictably, this led to [serious health consequences](#) for protestors, bystanders, and people in their own homes. On May 30th alone, eight people, including a journalist, lost an eye to tear gas canisters or rubber bullets fired by police.

There are long-standing concerns over the well-being of soldiers and veterans of war due to a range of problems beyond injury and death, including psychological trauma and chemical or hazardous material exposure. Among U.S. military service members, past and present, there are high rates of mental health and substance use disorders, abusive and violent behavior, and suicide.

The fear of negative reprisals for seeking mental health services, alcohol, and drug addiction treatment is a major cause for worry. [Half of U.S. military personnel](#) believe that seeking help for their mental health issues would negatively affect their military careers.

An estimated 20 active and/or veteran U.S. service members die by suicide every day. Despite various governmental and non-governmental efforts, this figure has remained consistent for the last decade. American veterans are 1.5 times more likely to die by suicide than Americans who never served in the military. For female veterans, the risk factor is 2.2 times more likely.

Even though firearms are involved in nearly 70% of veteran suicides, veterans' mental health records are not used to deprive veterans of their right to possess firearms, even when they are determined to be "mentally incompetent."

Substance use disorders are prevalent among military and former military service members. Heavy alcohol dependencies among veterans and active military have many negative health impacts, some with life-threatening consequences to individuals and their families. Active military employees spend more days a year consuming alcohol than workers in any other industry. U.S. veterans entering treatment programs report alcohol as the substance they most frequently misuse at a rate almost double that of the general population.

As with other populations, substance abuse is often linked to violence. [Intimate partner violence](#) is prevalent in the U.S. military for both women and men. Research indicates that 38% of female service members and veterans have survived [military sexual trauma](#).

The [2019 Department of Defense report](#) on sexual assault in the military shows a continuous rise in reported cases between 2015 and 2019. The DOD also received 937 reports in 2019 from U.S. civilians and foreign nationals alleging sexual assault perpetrated by U.S. service members.

“To free up billions of Pentagon dollars for investing in critical environmental projects and to eliminate the environmental havoc of war, movements for a livable, peaceful planet need to put ‘ending war’ at the top of the ‘must do’ list.”

- [Medea Benjamin](#) (September 27, 2019) *Foreign Policy in Focus*

What is the point of militarism? In the U.S., as most elsewhere, we are told that our armed forces are necessary to keep us safe and secure. Yet, as described, militarism is responsible for the creation of numerous existential threats.

Rather than continuing to spend trillions of dollars on the military, we need to examine our world with fresh eyes, and see that climate change, ecosystem loss, poverty, and inadequate public health systems threaten human security and wellbeing.

The answer is not more militarism. The answer is, at least in part, taking the resources we currently use to wage war and ecocide—using them instead to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and provide for everyone’s material needs, including healthcare. That is real security.

Steps We Can Take

- A great many people in our nation, including veterans, face eviction and losing their housing due to the COVID-19 crisis. Help veterans in our communities by recommending they call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: 1-877-424-3838. If a veteran you know needs assistance but is unable to make the call, please call on their behalf.
- Boycott corporations with ties to military operations, poor human rights records, and destructive environmental and health impacts, such as Dole Inc.
- Advocate for the demilitarization of police forces.
- Support mobilizations calling for the reallocation of military spending to the public health sector and environmental protection.

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["The Environmental Cost of War and Armed Conflict"](#) (November 5, 2020) *Friends Committee On National Legislation*

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["Focusing on Firearms Proves Contentious in Struggle to Reduce Veterans' Suicides"](#) (October 15, 2020) *New York Times*

["Major veterans suicide prevention legislation advances, but without discussion of guns"](#) (September 17, 2020) *MilitaryTimes*

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["Prevalence of intimate partner violence perpetration among military populations: A systematic review and meta-analysis"](#) (July/August 2020) *Aggression and Violent Behavior, A Review Journal*

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["For indigenous protesters, defending the environment can be fatal"](#) (June 8, 2020) *Grist*

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