

COVID-19: Exposing budgets as moral documents Pax Christi International, 6 May 2020

Ready for war but food insecure

Global military expenditures amounted to \$1917 billion in 2019, the highest level since 1988 and 3.6 percent higher in real terms than in 2018.¹ At the same time, robust trade in major arms continued. The US, for example, with a total military budget of \$756 billion for FY2020, exported major weapons systems to 96 countries. 73 percent of major weapons imported by Saudi Arabia, the world's largest arms importer in 2015–19, came from the US and 13 percent from the UK. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), the eighth-largest arms importer in the world during the same period, had major arms import deals with Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the UK and the US;² China exported weapons to 53 countries; South Korea and Israel greatly expanded their international weapons sales; and Egypt's arms *imports* tripled.² Meanwhile, nuclear weapons states will spend fortunes in the coming decades to modernize, develop new or expand stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

A direct theft from the poor

As the coronavirus threat became increasingly evident, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Ms. Hilal Elver, urged the international community “to pay particular attention to the situation of civilians trapped in conflict settings, and notably those already experiencing acute violations of their right to food, such as in Yemen, South Sudan, Gaza, Syria and in refugee camps worldwide.”³ Massive investment in arms and preparations for war by rich countries and poor countries alike; economies that depend on the development, production and sale of weapons; companies and countries that profit from marketing the tools of war have helped to create a “perfect storm,” in which millions of people and societies lack access to the necessities of life – including clean water, basic and emergency health care, food security, social structures - that would have enabled them to better withstand the onslaught of COVID-19.

- **In Yemen**, on 10 April, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the country where 10 million people are a step away from famine and seven million people are malnourished.⁴ The parties involved in the war have “blatantly obstructed and impeded the humanitarian response throughout the conflict, as well as weaponized the economy and food.”⁵ Thousands of civilians have been killed and injured; more than 3.6 million people have been internally displaced; and over 80 percent of Yemen's population is now dependent on humanitarian aid, including for food, shelter and other basic services.⁶
- **In Afghanistan**, the cost of wheat flour,⁷ fresh fruit and nutritious food items are rising fast and, without government control of food prices, there is a real danger of famine. Border closures, intended to restrict the spread of the corona virus, mean international supply lines of goods, mostly from Pakistan, will be severely restricted. Even though many farmers are optimistic for this year's harvest, after plentiful snows and rains this winter, the virus could hit just as the harvest starts in May,⁸ exacerbating food insecurity.
- **In Lebanon**, a deep socio-economic crisis is shaking the country, with the Lebanese pound in free fall and people losing income as measures are implemented to restrict the spread of the coronavirus. People have reached a level of desperation and anger that has led them to defy the COVID-19 restrictions. On Saturday 25 April, a branch of Fransabank was allegedly attacked by demonstrators shouting slogans against the government and the private banks, including the governor of the Central Bank.⁹ In Tripoli security forces reacted with violence and one protester was killed.
- **In Haiti**, more than 3.67 million people are facing emergency or crisis levels of food insecurity after the protests and economic disruptions several months ago; as Haiti moves into the “lean” season (March-

June), that number is expected to rise. Efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus are likely to worsen the situation. Families and neighbors traditionally work together to plant crops. Social distancing and staying at home are unaffordable luxuries as Haitians scramble to get seeds in the ground, buy and sell food at crowded urban markets and look for short-term work opportunities. “Vulnerable Haitian families will have to make the choice in the weeks ahead between respecting government containment efforts or feeding their families.”¹⁰

- **In Peru**, food security is one of the rights most threatened by the coronavirus. The survival of the majority who make up Peru’s lower economic strata is under daily threat. Authorities have no answers for poor families in the region and across the country seeking a way to live through the lockdown while meeting their most basic food needs. A desperate demand for an economic subsidy to cover the needs of the low-income majority has not been met.¹¹
- **Indigenous communities** include over 476 million people in 90 countries. Many live in extreme poverty and are already impacted by malnutrition, pre-existing conditions and lack of access to quality healthcare. As the pandemic’s impact is felt in mandatory lockdowns, for example, in Guatemala, India and Nepal, indigenous people will face higher prices for basic items like corn, beans and seeds for planting. Food insecurity will increase.¹²

Spending massive amounts on war and preparations for war is a direct affront to marginalized people who are facing the COVID-19 pandemic defenseless, without access to the most basic necessities of life that are essential in the context of this pandemic, among them food, clean water, health care.

The two hands of nonviolence speak clearly to this moment in history: “No” to the violence and false security of weapons and “Yes” to human dignity and food for all. The “No” is a freeze on the production and supply of weapons as proposed by *Global #FreezeWeapons Now*;¹³ the “Yes” is an immediate redirection of funds from preparations for war to meeting the urgent needs of millions of people facing hunger in the wake of this pandemic.

¹ Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2019>

² SIPRI Press Release, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says>

³ Economic Sanctions Should Be Lifted to Prevent Hunger, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25761&LangID=E>

⁴ Yemen: UNHCR Operational Update, 30 April 2020 <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/taizz-central-prison-hit-resulting-multiple-fatalities-and-injured-enar>

⁵ Yemen: Collective failure, collective responsibility – UN expert report <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24937&LangID=E>

⁶ “Yemen: Urgent Measures Needed to Protect Civilians from COVID-19,” Joint Civil Society Statement, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1252--joint-statement-yemen-urgent-measures-needed-to-protect-civilians-from-covid-19>

⁷ “Food prices soar under coronavirus threat in Afghanistan,” *The New Humanitarian*, <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/07/afghanistan-food-insecurity-coronavirus>

⁸ Voices for Creative Nonviolence UK, <https://vcnvuk.wordpress.com/>

⁹ *Observatoire Pharos* April 28, 2020, <https://www.observatoirepharos.com/>

¹⁰ “Haiti Faces Triple Threat: COVID-19, Hunger Crisis and Hurricane Season,” Mercy Corps, <https://www.mercycorps.org/press-room/releases/haiti-faces-triple-threat>

¹¹ “COVID-19 in Peru,” Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, <https://maryknollogc.org/article/covid-19-peru>

¹² “COVID-19’s Growing Impact on Indigenous Communities Globally,” *Cultural Survival*, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/covid-19s-growing-impact-indigenous-communities-globally>

¹³ <https://www.scrapweapons.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid19-Freeze-Main-Strategy-Document.pdf>