FOOD, WATER AND WAR: SECURITY IN A WORLD OF CONFLICT

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Food, Water and War: Security in a World of Conflict

Admiral Chris Barrie

I appreciate very much the opportunity I have today to speak at this Crawford Fund conference on food, water and war. Although I do not profess to be an expert at all on the very complex issues of international agricultural research and poverty relief I do, nonetheless, have some thoughts on the possible sources of conflict and Australia's involvement in conflict to date, particularly as these may have implications for our own future security, as well as relevance for our region and the world at large. This is a wonderful opportunity to engage in a discussion on security, particularly what I call the broader definition of security.

Moreover, I think it is also timely, not only in a policy sense as we move through the Defence White Paper process, but also because we now have a tangible regional context for this very important discussion. For Australia this has been lacking, which I think has tended to make the whole issue of security a little abstract in nature, rather than a real 'here and now' issue.

Minister Downer has outlined the fundamental relevance of food and water security in our region and the multi-layered approach Australia is taking to meet these challenges.

I would like to talk to you specifically about some of my ideas of where we need to head in the coming years to deal with the problems the world confronts, and more specifically where professional military activities can contribute to solving these problems.

It is also a mark of a maturing approach to these issues that a Chief of the Defence Force would be invited to speak at a forum which not so long ago would have been the purview of NGOs, government aid providers and academics only. After all, it was not that long ago that a Victorian Government agency characterised Defence Force personnel as 'harm workers'. I put it to you that this is far from the case in Australia where our defence force draws

its very professionalism from the fact that it strives to be a 'force for good'.

So I believe that the Australian Defence Force has a legitimate, and in some cases, central part to play along with other government and non-government agencies in contributing to our thinking on these issues.

If, as I suspect, I am the first Defence Chief to be involved in a public seminar held in Australia on the important links between diminishing access to resources and conflict, I certainly hope I am not the last!

In my view, my presence is symbolic of an important change in our national approach to security issues, bringing with it recognition that security must be addressed at least on a whole-of-government approach, but preferably in the end on a whole-of-nation approach. I contrast this position with what we used to do, that is deal with security problems separately through the traditional channels of defence, diplomacy and aid. This is because many pressures now shape a Government's judgement as to what is, or is not, in the national interest, and many of these pressures, though interweaved in complex ways, have little regard for political boundaries.

Today, other factors such as poverty, infrastructure development, living standards, the impact of globalisation and access to life's essentials are becoming important dimensions to States and their national interest. A reflection of the recognition of the interdependency of basic factors such as food, water and war can be seen on the Internet—the number of web sites devoted to this subject is astonishing.

Food and Water

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Let us just consider one basic element of human existence—food. In affluent societies we take ready access to food and water for granted, but in their absence people are driven to do whatever it takes to get them. Yet, as we have already heard, there are a number of reports which conclude that the world can support the present population we have quite comfortably if only we could get the distribution right, and there are even projections that we can do so well into this century.

So what has any of this to do with war you might ask. Well, let me give you one example of how this can work.

In the Russian Civil War in the early 1920s, many of the Bolshevik soldiers in Central Asia were Austro-Hungarian ex-POWs. The reason? There had been a large POW camp in the vicinity of Tashkent, and when the armistice was concluded between the Germans and the new Bolshevik regime in 1917, the

POWs were released into the chaotic circumstances of the time. No one bothered to arrange for them to be returned home or even fed. So they joined the Bolshevik Army, which guaranteed them a uniform and at least one meal per day. And the rest is history!

To me this has obvious relevance to the present day experience of warlord-prone regions like Somalia and militia-prone regions like Timor. If the circumstances of life are precarious enough, it is easy for the bad guys to recruit young people to their cause for a uniform and some food, however squalid or ill-defined the particular cause might be.

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Why then are people starving and suffering famine in so many places, particularly Africa and Asia? Why do inequality and conflict continue to grow? The message that comes through loud and clear from many studies all over the world is that, while physical or climatic factors play a role in famines, the primary factor that tips the balance and causes the malnutrition and death of so many people is political or man-made.

It is war and civil strife that I am talking about. Just as this occurred in Russia in the 1920s, we are witnessing numerous situations like it today. Furthermore, many of the problems associated with lack of food, including hunger, poverty, unemployment and social unrest, highlight the circular nature of the argument about the causes of major conflict in the post-Cold War period.

I know we will hear from many experts today on the role of development in trying to solve these problems, and in particular, the importance of international agricultural research in advancing that development. This emphasis is important and must not be underestimated. Science and agricultural development have important roles to play in both reducing the likelihood of conflict and assisting with nation building post-conflict. But development alone will not be enough!

There are also some who say that if we stop spending money on military forces and channel those resources into aid and social improvement programs, then the problem would be solved. I regard this approach as very simplistic, and at the same time I wish it was that easy to solve. In my opinion the fundamental difficulty we face can be summed up quite simply. We need to understand human nature and get people to behave appropriately towards each other, at both the individual level, and collectively up to the state-on-state level.

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This is THE problem for the international community in our time. How are we going to deal with people who do not abide by basic ethical rules? With our current system of nation states, we seem incapable of solving this problem unless there is a dramatic

change in the way we all behave. When we no longer need police forces in our communities to deal with dangerous and inappropriate behaviour, that is the day we can afford to disband our military forces.

Let me emphasise that I am not advocating interfering in the internal affairs of other countries here, or disbanding the institution of the nation state. But what do we do about nations or sub-national groups deliberately misbehaving and acting illegally, or how do we deal with the collapse of nations that have basically dissolved into a disparate bunch of warlords?

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At the most basic level, some degree of law and order (even if imposed by an autocrat not himself subject to the law) is a fundamental requirement of subsistence agriculture. It takes months to gather a crop. If marauding bands are going to trample that crop or steal the harvest, what is the point? If you have little hope of harvesting a crop, you might as well join one of the marauding bands.

Often one of the most obvious means of enhancing food security is the ability through appropriate investments in infrastructure to control the seasonal and/or irregular flow of water both in order to irrigate crops and to prevent the harvest from being wiped out by floods.

The great empires such as those of Egypt, Tigris-Euphrates, and Rome, for example, have had this capability at their heart since time immemorial. One of the reasons they developed such large and capable bureaucracies and codified systems of law was to enable the infrastructure to be designed, constructed and regulated, land and water rights to be apportioned, harvests to be gathered and sold, and taxes on production to be levied. The taxes in turn provided the financial resources to the central authority to provide the means, such as armed forces, to maintain the peace both within the empire and at its borders.

The total absence in places like Somalia of a central authority which is able to organise the investment required to release the villagers from the vagaries of the weather means it is difficult to conceive of even the commencement of the basic wealth creation process that will enable a start to the development of improved living standards.

At a higher level of development, investment in manufacturing and service industries is needed in order to create sufficient employment to enable opportunities for those who do not grow their own food to purchase it for cash. Many of the most important investment decisions are made by global corporations, who will not sink their capital in countries where property rights are not secure. This means that there is an almost inevitable

vicious circle of connection between war and poverty. This cycle must be broken for conditions to improve.

While I am on the subject of investment let me talk a little about water. A very important by-product of the capacity to control water is the question of access to clean drinking water. A large proportion of the third world population has difficult access to safe drinking water, and a very large proportion has no access at all. Apart from this leading to great problems with endemic disease, the infant mortality rate is a great incentive to having large families, the children being the only social security fall-back that their parents have in old age.

Environmentalists have done a lot to expose us to the dangers of many things that we have done in our daily lives which endanger our quality of life or threaten our children's future. However, in relation to the development of infrastructure for the control of water flows for irrigation, electricity and the provision of safe drinking water, I think some of them are way off the mark.

We have been encouraged to think that Africa is overcrowded, but it is not. For its size Africa carries an astonishingly small proportion of the world's population, whereas Holland is what you would call crowded, and so is Germany. Yet some people campaign so vociferously and successfully against the construction of dams that international financial institutions are very reluctant to invest in them even when the local political situation permits.

Such investment is important, so we must couple the requirement to use aid funds for construction projects, with the need to provide emergency relief, and other means of alleviating short-term poverty, such as handing out sacks of rice. Both are important. From an Australian perspective I think this emphasis on the value of infrastructure investment can be no better demonstrated than the recent opening of the lower Mekong Bridge.

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Apart from internal stability, the quality of national institutions is becoming an increasingly important issue in economic development. Where poor quality national institutions exist countries are forced to borrow short-term money for long-term investment, and as the Asian meltdown showed, the situation can collapse with frightening rapidity when investors lose confidence.

I conclude from this analysis that what many of these strife-torn regions need above all else is peace and good governance, neither of which are likely to come from within. The building of countries which can stand on their own feet and look after their people responsibly seems to me to be the fundamental problem which the international community has to come to terms with if food and water shortages are to be overcome successfully for all people.

A New Framework for Security

Let me say from the outset that our understanding of the causes of conflict has grown considerably in the last 20 years. Up until the late 1980s, the debate on development, conflict and security was dominated by the traditional concerns of history, ideology and geography and viewed through the prism of East/West relations. In turn, this reinforced a crude ontology about the nature of 'power'.

Today, other factors such as poverty, infrastructure development, living standards, the impact of globalisation and access to life's essentials are commanding more attention in a more rigorous discussion. This is a serious debate that we need to have because our future security may depend on it.

Australia's Role and Responsibilities

As I said earlier this is not an abstract issue for Australia. It is important because it is an issue, which should be at the heart of our vision of ourselves as a nation and our role in this very rapidly changing world.

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We are fortunate to enjoy a living standard, which is the envy of most of the world. However, our basic character is formed from making the most of a harsh environment, leading to a 'can-do', innovative culture. Many of us travel and we have managed to create successfully one of the world's more advanced multicultural societies. Our young people have always been, and still are passionate about getting out there and making a difference to shape a better world.

We have no territorial disputes with our neighbours. But, we are also located in a region which features developing economies, infant democracies and increasing political instability from tensions pre-dating the end of the Cold War. I believe that our region is in a state of transition, which will fundamentally challenge many assumptions that have guided the way business has been done in Asia.

Presently, regional security cooperation is limited. Even where that cooperation does exist, in such bodies as APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN itself, events like the Asian economic downturn have demonstrated the challenges facing the region. Recent regional initiatives such as ASEAN + 3, the ASEAN troika proposal and Minister Downer's 'Good offices' role for the chair of ASEAN Regional Forum all have great potential. But it is still uncertain as to whether these initiatives will provide the genuine beginnings of 'regionalism' such as we have seen in other parts of the world.

As far as my own role as CDF is concerned, I am convinced that defence forces, in concert with other government agencies and

businesses, committed to working cooperatively with other nations, can be a force for positive social and political development. This is where I see the Australian Defence Force as a prime example of being part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We have shown by our professional behaviour that some of those challenges can be solved. We have also set an example to other military forces on how to achieve success by behaving appropriately and lawfully—what I call a 'force for good'.

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An important challenge for all first world governments, multilateral agencies and non-government organisations will be to reconsider their traditional roles and approach in the development of security policy.

If countries such as Australia seek to take a prominent and useful role in a region dominated by developing countries, they will need to be prepared to mobilise all aspects of government if long-term benefits are to be gained. As the demand increases on traditional emergency organisations, exit strategies must become mandatory elements of our planning. Therefore the planning to hand-off to other government and non-government agencies will need to be deliberate and start as early as possible. This more comprehensive approach will also place an onus on governments to convince the domestic constituency about the benefits of active, long-term involvement with the developing world.

Currently, in the Australian context, there is an excellent opportunity for the Government to be informed on these issues through the community consultation process on defence and security issues that is being undertaken by the team led by Andrew Peacock. And I would encourage everyone to contribute to that process. It should lead to a better understanding between the Defence and non-Defence community and a more open debate on what is required and appropriate to secure our interests and to meet future challenges.

There is a real need for our community to understand that there is a whole range of commitments involved in successfully solving our security concerns in our region, and indeed, around the world. Furthermore, there is no doubt that security and economic development are linked. This requires us to address our security concerns across, not only the government, but also the nation, in a coordinated way to maximise the chance of success. Moreover, we must work with responsible members of the international community on these issues, too.

In many ways this approach is already under way. Australian governments have for some time been very vocal advocates for the region through good times and bad. Examples include Cambodia, Bougainville, the IMF, and tsunami and drought relief. However,

we will need to do better at creating a continuum between the traditional elements of security and the 'softer' sectors of the new security environment.

Our response to regional tensions typically takes the form of aid and, depending on the crisis, military intervention, with very little continuing integration between the two once events take a turn for the worse or the initial crisis is over. There are currently few processes to link the two at the policy level and it is usually left up to the people on the ground to work out suitable arrangements. This ad hoc approach does not always result in the efficient and effective delivery of assistance in the sometimes long transition to peace and stability.

I also believe that there is a role to be played by Australian industry. In Australia, we enjoy a level of transparency and accountability in business that can give us the confidence in the ability of Australian organisations to play a positive role in developing countries. The efforts of our telecommunications carriers in East Timor is one such example.

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By working collaboratively to create stable, democratic nations in our immediate region, we can simultaneously improve our strategic environment and create the pre-conditions and stability required for nation building. If left unchecked, power vacuums, institutionalised injustice and economic stagnation become a recipe for declining security for everyone concerned. Hence the relevance of our topic today—food, water and war.

The Australian community already has a long history of supporting our alliance and United Nations obligations. The East Timor deployment clearly demonstrated the Australian public's expectation for us to continue that approach. However, I do not believe that there is a comparable understanding or appreciation in the community for the non-military aspects of our commitment to the East Timorese people. After the hand over to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in February, there was a palpable sense in the Australian community that our job was done, and that the deployment of our defence force was the sum total of our involvement.

As you would know, this is clearly not the case. The Australian Government and non-government agencies will, in unison with UNTAET, provide long-term development and aid assistance well into the future. The involvement of the ADF is only one dimension. As an example, AusAID and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) are assisting with the rehabilitation of East Timor's agricultural sector. This is a crucial body of work which can ensure a successful transition of the East Timorese to nationhood if successful.

It is worth noting that the Australian defence personnel serving in East Timor are currently doing their bit, too. They are facilitating a range of activities from confidence building on the border, to delivering food to schools, repairing roadworks and basic infrastructure, and helping out in specialised areas such as communications, which cannot always be met by aid agencies.

The lessons from East Timor, Bougainville, Cambodia and Somalia are clear. If we are to play a role in bringing security and prosperity to nations under stress then the commitment will be far more complex than just a military response—which I might add is complex enough!

East Timor has again demonstrated the truism that security is a necessary precondition for economic and social development. Once a society has descended into destructive violence, none of the public works, health assistance, or food aid is going to work until there is basic security for the population.

On the other side of the coin, however, just as much effort and resources should go into using our experience to assist our neighbours to prevent these situations spiralling into inevitable military conflict. To cite some relevant cases: sudden increases in food prices led to riots in Indonesia in 1998; environmental concerns are a cause of on-going tensions in West Papua and Bougainville; and, most recently, the events in Fiji and the Solomon Islands are partly the result of disputes over access to profitable land and resources.

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As such, the need for a strong sophisticated ongoing role in our region is all the more apparent. I believe Australia is well positioned to confidently grasp this opportunity.

The Role of the ADF in the New Security Environment

This brings me to what I see as the specific role for the ADF within this more complex security environment.

In the military sense the ADF has been at the vanguard of regional engagement over many years. I believe the men and women of Defence have made a real contribution alongside other government and non-government agencies to fostering peace and stability in our region.

Since the 1950s we have been actively involved in military exchanges, defence cooperation programs, joint training and operational deployments through such initiatives as the Five Power Defence Agreement, and information sharing.

We have been a learning organisation, too. In many ways, Defence has been in the lead pack, which has included the

business sector and other government agencies, in creating long-term relations of trust and understanding throughout the region. Capitalising on this unique skills base in Defence is a valuable dimension of any government's strategy for constructive engagement with the region.

But it is becoming expected in our communities that professional military forces will have the flexibility to make major contributions in operations other than war, deploy for long periods of time to stabilise the security situation in the post-conflict environment, and to deal with unconventional forces and non-State actors such as refugees, illegal immigrants, smugglers and criminals. The ADF is no exception.

It has played, and will continue to play, a positive role in nation-building and inter-agency cooperation in our region. This is an enormously valuable and sophisticated contribution to our Government's ability to operate effectively in a complex security environment.

Today, in addition to our core military skills we are also expected to provide humanitarian assistance, whether it be protecting the welfare of non-combatants, performing basic law and order tasks, arms monitoring, mine-clearing in the post-conflict period, or distributing basic medical and food aid. We have shown on numerous occasions that one of our strengths is relating successfully with local people and helping them help themselves to improve their lot.

Before the East Timor deployment, I made the comment that 'While there is no doubt that our core business is to provide traditional military options to Government, the Defence Force has also become an important resource which provides Government with a range of options not associated with force-on-force considerations.' In short, we have a dual role—we must actively work for peace, as well as prepare for war.

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Whether we like it or not, armed force is still a dominating feature of international relations. Military capability is still a major determinant of a nation-state's ability to influence events and outcomes.

If Australia is to shape regional development in favour of security and prosperity, then we need to ensure our place at the negotiating table and our ability to act in times of crisis. That will require an appropriately structured ADF. As I have argued, it will also depend on the degree of cooperation between the military and non-military dimensions of our security policy.

Conclusion

History has shown us that better access to life's essentials, basic infrastructure and political democracy diminishes the likelihood of inter- and intrastate conflict, although it can never dismissed outright. But, as we all know, the road to development is a difficult one.

In his book, 'Preparing for the 21st Century' Paul Kennedy points to a more fractured and unpredictable world despite the absence of the large state-on-state conflicts that typified the 20th century. The lesson is clear—we must be prepared to do more, rather than less, to maintain peace and security.

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The key question before this conference is how much investment in 'security' should be made in areas like access to food, agricultural development and the environment, which lie outside the classical military dimension. I believe that as our appreciation for the new framework for security grows, governments will be more inclined to explore the possibilities of creating a closer relationship and mission between defence forces, aid organisations and development agencies. This need will become even more demanding as we see an increase in the number of defence forces deployed in pre-emptive, multi-agency operations aimed at addressing basic humanitarian needs.

What is absolutely clear, is that Australia has a role to play in nation building and security in our region. By way of our material advantages and our conviction as a nation concerned with human rights, this will inevitably involve both military and non-military components. That is why I am looking forward to the outcomes of the conference. The aspects of the security debate which are the special focus of this conference have real relevance to government and the future conduct and capabilities of the ADF.

Because there is no doubt in my mind that it does not matter how much research we do, or how many resources in particular areas we devote to these challenges, if we have no comprehensive and coordinated national and international security and law and order mechanisms to address these fundamental problems of human behaviour, they will not be solved.

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to make my contribution.