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Military Spending vs. People's Health

Distorted Realities

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The latest report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that, considering some data uncertainties, the world military spending in 2012 dropped slightly (0.5 percent) when compared to 2011. It is the first decline in military spending since 1998. This could be a cause for celebration, except that it is still a perverse use of funds, which could be better diverted to improve people's health and to promote peace.

According to SIPRI's estimates, world military spending in 2012 was \$1,75 trillion, of which \$682 billion were spent by the US, \$166 billion by China and \$90.7 billion by Russia. There was a slight decline in spending by the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, and Western and Central Europe. Reductions in those countries, however, were upset by increased spending in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America.

In perspective, military expenditures were several hundred times the World Health Organization (WHO)'s annual budget of \$3,95 billion for the 2012-2013 period. Programs funded by the organization include: addressing the global AIDS pandemic; controlling resurgent tuberculosis; dealing with the global disease burden among women and children; addressing accident and trauma victims' needs; responding to emergency and humanitarian crises, and developing effective health systems, among many other tasks.

World military spending is also several hundred times higher than the annual budget of the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) of over \$10.0 billion, and the Gates Foundation, which in 2012 donated \$ 1.3 billion to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Efforts by these agencies have succeeded in eliminating diseases or minimizing their negative impact on people's health.

It is difficult to assess if the recent leveling of military spending represents a long-term change. Although some countries have diminished their disbursements others have maintained or even increased them. This slight decrease may be temporary, mainly due to the current economic crises and will resume as soon as these crises end. For example, most European countries' dire economies may mean that spending will continue to fall for the next 2-4 years.

In the US, military spending fell 6 percent, mainly because of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and the diminished number of troops in Afghanistan. In these cases, reduced spending on the additional war budget, also known as Overseas Contingency Operations, will probably continue falling if plans to end combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014 are fulfilled, and if the US doesn't get involved in another major war. The US still spent more than the next 10 biggest military spenders in 2012.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has stated that redirecting just one quarter of developing countries' military expenditure would allow for many drastic improvements in people's health and well being. Funds could be better used to immunize children, eliminate severe malnutrition, provide safe water and universal primary education, and reduce illiteracy.

However, distorted priorities remain, and the leading industrialized countries share the responsibility, since they are the main arms suppliers. The top five arms exporters to developing countries are the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

The leading world powers devote astronomical sums to activities aimed at destroying life in detriment of the paltry sums spent on improving people's health (particularly of the most vulnerable.) This is a sad commentary about the possibilities of creating a peaceful, harmonious world.