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WHAT DOES FOOD AND WATER HAVE TO DO WITH WAR?

Tim Fischer

Paper prepared for presentation at the “Food, Water and War Security in a World of Conflict” conference conducted by the Crawford Fund for International Agricultural Research, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, August 15, 2000

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THE HON TIM FISCHER MP is one of Australia's most highly regarded politicians. His long career in politics began after he left the Australian Army in 1970 and he began to raise the profile of rural Australia at the State, and then Federal, level. He was elected Leader of the National Party in 1990 and appointed Shadow Minister for Trade in 1993. In 1996 he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade. His interest and advocacy for Australia to become a trading super-power, especially in Asia, are well known. Mr Fischer retired as Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Trade and Leader of the National Party in June 1999 and continues to serve his constituents in Farrer, while lending his considerable advocacy and political talents to chair the Crawford Fund's Board of Management.

What Does Food and Water Have to Do With War?

THE HON. TIM FISCHER

The topic of The Crawford Fund's Year 2000 conference was a challenging and timely one. Despite the fact that many accept the concept of the beneficial returns to donor countries from investing in development assistance, few would consider that it might also contribute to peace in the developing world.

Can we add 'peace' to the more tangible returns to development assistance, such as growth in trade, goodwill between nations, greater cultural, educational and scientific cooperation, and technological gains?

The Crawford Fund believes that agriculture, food, and access to natural resources like water, play key roles in development for poor nations and in avoiding conflict.

In the complicated matrix of the causes of conflict in developing countries we encouraged participants at the conference to think about security outside the military dimension.

Many think tanks around the world, including the world-renowned Peace Research Institute in Oslo, believe that the post-cold war era calls for new policies that will help avert conflict in the 21st century. These policies need to address a different paradigm for violence and conflict—that of supplying basic human needs.

The keynote speaker at the conference, Admiral Chris Barrie AO RAN, signalled a new shift in our understanding of what security is. Fighting for food, said Admiral Barrie, is a stronger driver than allegiances and politics. He believes that Australia must be prepared to do more to maintain peace and security in our region, and he advocated a multidisciplinary approach—a 'whole-of-nation'—approach as he termed it, to peacekeeping and conflict resolution in our region of the world.

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*...there can be no peace
in the world while people
are poor and hungry.*

Other Australian and international speakers highlighted a growing awareness of the potential for conflict over lack of access to resources. Most agreed that hungry people are more likely to become embroiled in conflict because they become discontented and disaffected and are ultimately easy prey for elite groups who see them as simply a means to their own selfish and greedy ends.

Former US President Jimmy Carter said that there can be no peace in the world while people are poor and hungry. The take-home message from this conference was that we can solve the problems of the hungry, but this will involve increased support for agricultural research, national and international, to feed the world's growing population. We also have to solve the distribution problem so that hungry people have access to food in the marketplace.

Ultimately a major cause of conflict in developing countries is poverty, and the best way to overcome poverty is through economic growth. The Crawford Fund firmly believes that agriculture is the engine that drives economic growth, and helps create peace in order for developing countries to grow and take an equal place in the world. Helping the agricultural sector to grow is essential to human destiny in the 21st century.

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