

Climate: Military's Role in Greenhouse Gases Raised in the Streets of Glasgow

Monday 15 November 2021, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2021).

The most important events at the UN-sponsored climate conference in Glasgow occurred not inside, but in meetings and demonstrations outside.

On November 8 there was a march of climate activists, mostly young, of some 100,000. On this march, one of the issues raised was the huge contribution of the U.S. military to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

“War Is Not Green” was a banner held by members of the U.S. organization, Code Pink.

The U.S. military budget of over three-fourths of a trillion dollars this year, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, is greater than that of the next 11 countries combined, according to the Stockholm International Peace Institute as of April of this year.

These are in decreasing order: China, India, Russia, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, Italy and Australia.

U.S. war spending comprises 10 percent of the federal budget, and one-half of “discretionary” spending by Congress which doesn't include fixed programs such as social security, medicare, etc.

The U.S. has about 750 military bases in 80 other countries, plus another 400 or so in the U.S.

This huge military is one of the pillars of the U.S. empire that spans much of the world. Another is the dominance of the world financial system, symbolized by the dollar's role as the world's reserve currency.

Just the maintaining these bases, including all their equipment as well as the soldiers in them, produces vast amounts of burning of fossil fuels in aircraft, gas-guzzling tanks and other vehicles, etc.

Wars increases all these costs.

The Costs of War project estimates the military produced around 1.2 billion metric tons of carbon emissions between 2001 and 2017, with nearly a third coming from U.S. wars under the rubric of the “war on terror”.

But military carbon emissions have largely been exempted from international climate treaties dating back to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol after lobbying from the United States.

Speakers at large Fridays for Future rally in Glasgow also called out the U.S. military's role in the climate emergency.

One was Ayisha Siddiq, who said, “I come from northern region of Pakistan. ... The U.S.

Department of Defense has a larger annual carbon footprint than most countries on Earth, and it also is the single largest polluter on Earth.

“Its military presence in my region has cost the United States over \$8 trillion since 1976. It has contributed to the destruction of environment in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, the greater Persian Gulf and Pakistan.

“Not only have Western-induced wars led to spikes in the carbon emissions, they have led to use of depleted uranium, and they have caused poisoning of air and water and have led to birth defects, cancer and suffering of thousands of people.”

Democracy Now interviewed three of the activists on November 8, which shed more light: Ramón Mejía, anti-militarism national organizer of Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and Iraq War veteran; Erik Edstrom, Afghanistan War veteran turned climate activist; and Neta Crawford, director of the Costs of War project at Brown University and professor of political science at Boston University.

Amy Goodman, the host of Democracy Now, interviewed Crawford at the march, and asked, “Why are you at the climate summit? We usually just talk to you about the costs of war.”

Crawford said, “I’m here because there are several universities in the U.K. which have launched an initiative to try to include military emissions more fully in the individual countries’ declarations of their emissions.

“Every year, every country that’s in Annex I — that is, the parties to the treaty from Kyoto — have to put some of their military emissions in their national inventories, but it’s not a full accounting. And that’s what we’d like to see.

“I think there’s three things to keep in mind here. First, there are emissions from installations. The United States has about 750 military installations abroad, overseas, and it has about 400 in the U.S. “For most of those installations abroad, we don’t know what their emissions are.

“That is because of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol decision to exclude those emissions or have them count for the country that the bases are located in.

“Another thing that we don’t know is a large portion of emissions from war operations. So, at Kyoto, the decision was taken not to include operations from war that was sanctioned by the United Nations or other multilateral operations. So those emissions are not included.

“There’s also something known as bunker fuels, which are the fuels used on aircraft and ships in international waters. Most of the United States Navy’s operations are in international waters, so we don’t know those emissions.

“In 1997, the Department of Defense sent a memo to the White House saying that if war missions were included, then the U.S. military might have to reduce its operations. And they said in their memo, a 10% reduction in emissions would lead to a lack of readiness.

“That would mean that the United States would not be prepared to do two things, the memo said. One is be militarily superior and wage war anytime, anywhere, and then, secondly, not be able to respond [militarily] to what they saw as the climate crisis that we would face.

“Why were they so aware of the climate crisis in 1997? Because they had been studying it since the 1950s and 1960s, and they were aware of the effects of greenhouse gases.

“So, that’s what’s included and what’s excluded.

“And there’s another large category of emissions we don’t know about, which is any emission coming out of the military-industrial complex. All of the equipment that we use has to be produced somewhere. Much of it comes from large military-industrial corporations in the United States.

“Some of those corporations acknowledge what are known as direct and somewhat indirect emissions, but we don’t know the entire supply chain.

“I have an estimate that the top military-industrial companies have emitted about the same amount of fossil fuel emissions, greenhouse gas emissions, as the military itself in any one year.

“So, really, when we think about the entire carbon footprint of the United States military, it has to be said that we’re not counting all of it. And in addition, we’re not counting Department of Homeland Security emissions — I haven’t counted them yet — and those should be included, as well.”

Ramón Mejía was also interviewed on the march, and here are excerpts:

“There can’t be any genuine discussion about addressing climate change if we’re not including the military. The military, as we know, is the largest consumer of fossil fuels and also the largest emitter of greenhouse gases most responsible for the climate disruption.”

The group Global Witness has estimated that there are over 100 coal, oil and gas company lobbyists and their associated groups at COP26.

“When you have fossil fuel industries that have a larger delegation than most of our frontline communities and the Global South, then we’re being silenced,” Mejía said.

“This space [in the official COP26 meeting] is not a space for genuine discussions. It’s a discussion for transnational corporations and industry and polluting governments to continue to try and find ways to go as business as usual without actually addressing the roots of the conversation.

“You know, this COP has been dubbed net zero, the COP of net zero, but this is just a false unicorn. It’s a false solution, just the same way as greening the military is.... Greening the military is also not the solution. We have to address the violence that the military wages and the catastrophic effects it has on our world.

“So, the conversations within the COP aren’t genuine, because we can’t even hold pointed conversations and hold those accountable. We have to speak in generalities.

“You know, we can’t say ‘U.S. military’; we have to say ‘military.’ We can’t say that our government is the one that’s most responsible for pollution; we have to speak in generalities. So, when there is this unlevel playing field, then we know that the discussions aren’t genuine here.

“The genuine discussions and the real change is happening in the streets with our communities and our international movements that are here to not only discuss but apply pressure. This — you know, what is it? We’ve been calling it, that the COP is, you know, profiteers. It’s the convening of profiteers. That’s what it is.

“We’re here not to concede this space in which power resides. We’re here to apply pressure, and we’re also here to speak on behalf of our international comrades and movements from around the world that aren’t able to come to Glasgow because of vaccine apartheid and the restrictions that they have on coming to discuss what’s happening in their communities.

“So we’re here to uplift their voices and to continue to speak on — you know, with them, on what’s happening around the world.”

Amy Goodman, host of Democracy Now introduced Erik Edstrom, “Afghan War vet, who went on to study climate at Oxford and write the book *Un-American: A Soldier’s Reckoning of Our Longest War*.

“I’ll ask you the same question as I asked Ramón. Here you were a veteran. How you went from that to a climate activist, and what we should understand about the costs of war at home and abroad?”

He replied, “The journey to climate activism, I think, started when I was in Afghanistan and realized that we were solving the wrong problem the wrong way. We were missing the upstream issues underpinning foreign policy around the world, which is the disruption caused by climate change, which endangers other communities.

“It creates geopolitical risk. And to be focusing on Afghanistan, effectively playing Taliban whack-a-mole, while ignoring the climate crisis, seemed like a terrible use of priorities.

“So when I was done with my military service, wanted to study what I believe is the most important issue facing this generation. And today, when reflecting upon military emissions in the overall accounting globally, it’s not only intellectually dishonest to exclude them, it is irresponsible and dangerous.”

Democracy Now’s Juan Gonzales said “I’d like to ask you about the relationship between oil and the military, the U.S. military but also other imperial militaries around the world. There’s historically been a relationship of militaries seeking to control oil resources in times of war, as well as being the prime users of these oil resources to build up their military capacity, hasn’t there?”

Edstrom replied, “Not only is the military the largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels in the world, I think that that definitely drives some of the decision-making in the military.

“The emissions attributable to the U.S. military is more than civilian aviation and shipping combined. But one of the things I really wanted to drive home in this conversation is around something that’s not discussed very much in the costs of war, which is the social cost of carbon or the negative externalities associated with our global footprint as a military around the world.”

He referred to the “1.2 billion metric tons of estimated emissions from the military during the time of the global war on terror. And when you look at public health studies that start to do the calculus to say how many tonnes must you emit in order to harm somebody elsewhere in the world, it’s about 4,400 tonnes.

“So, if you do the simple arithmetic, the global war on terror has potentially caused up the 270,000 climate-related deaths around the globe, which further heightens and exacerbates an already high cost of war....

“Morally, it is also further undermining the very mission statement and the oath of the military, which is to protect Americans and be a global force for good, if you take a globalized or globalization perspective.

“Undermining the climate crisis and turbocharging it is not the [stated] role of the military, and we need to apply additional pressure for them to both disclose and reduce its massive carbon footprint....

“I think that probably at the senior levels of brass within the military, there is understanding that

climate change is a real and existential threat. There is a disconnect, though, which is a point of tension, which is: What is the military going to do specifically about it, and then specifically its own emissions?

'If the military were to disclose its full carbon footprint and to do so on a regular basis, that number would be deeply embarrassing and create a tremendous amount of political pressure on the U.S. military to reduce those emissions going forward. So you could understand their reluctance....

"We must count every tonne of emissions, irrespective of whether it is politically inconvenient to do so. And without the disclosure, we are running blind."

Barry Sheppard
