

## **Address by Dr Sue Wareham (MAPW Australia) at Palm Sunday Rally for Refugees Sydney, Hyde Park North, 9 April 2017**

I wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and pay respects to their elders past, present and future. Thank you for this opportunity to speak. I want at the outset to applaud the work of the RACs throughout Australia including here in Sydney in maintaining the pressure for humane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and acknowledge the work of my medical colleagues in the group Doctors for Refugees.

We're united by an appalling sense of shame at the Australian government's abuse of vulnerable people in our refugee detention centres. I was going to say "shame at what is being done in our name", but Australia's treatment of people who simply want safety is not done in our name; we reject it with every bit of humanity that we have. We see people's lives destroyed, people treated as playthings and all for cheap, grubby, offensive political capital. This is not done in our name.

I've been asked to comment on the global context in which we see the issue of refugees, and especially the role of warfare in creating such a crisis. Globally, the number of people fleeing in search of safety is unprecedented, around 65 million people. These people are either internally displaced or trying desperately to find another country to call home. Half of the world's refugees come from 3 countries – Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

The catastrophe that's occurring in Syria demonstrates starkly the human costs of wars in a region that Australia helped destabilise in 2003 and where Australia still supports the violence that is occurring. We are told there are noble motives such as the protection of innocent people.

And yet our government's concern for civilians caught up in war zones is so great that these people are not even counted. There is *no* official government estimate of the number of civilians dead, injured or displaced from the wars we fight, no estimate of the extent of humanitarian aid that's needed. We are forever ready to join the bombing, but not to help those affected.

Our leaders talk about the importance of democracy, but the leadership of both our biggest political parties refuse to consider a role for our parliament in the biggest decision a country can make – a decision to go to war. Both Labor and the Coalition refuse to acknowledge the dangers – so amply demonstrated in 2003 – of a system in which a decision to go to war can be made by just one person, the PM. And former PM, John Howard, who led us into an illegal act of aggression in 2003, still walks free.

Australians for War Powers Reform are working to ensure that any decision for war is made by our parliament and not by one person. Then there might be some important questions asked *before* our troops are deployed, including questions about the military strategy, the likely duration, and the likely humanitarian impacts. How many civilians will be affected, how will they be cared for, what budget is set aside for shelter, food, water, health care for them all, as we pour billions of dollars into war-making. How many refugees from the war will Australia accept? All these questions need to be addressed we go to war. And as for the strategy in Syria, one can only wonder, as the US is now fighting on two sides in that conflict.

Increasingly, warfare seems to be all we know how to do in response to conflict and tensions. Australia's diplomacy and conflict resolution skills are grossly degraded, our capacity to wage war is escalating, and we are becoming less secure as a result. Australia is the only US ally to have joined every major US war since WW2. Yet when people flee warzones for safety we demonise them; we just don't want to know about it.

Australia's hypocrisy goes further. On the issue of weapons of mass destruction, when chemical weapons are used, Australian leaders are appropriately outraged, although they instantly seem to be certain of who did it even without the benefit of an investigation. And yet those same Australian leaders refuse to rule out the use of weapons, on our behalf, that are in fact even more catastrophic: nuclear weapons.

Australia is right now trying to undermine historic negotiations at the UN for a treaty to explicitly prohibit the possession and use of nuclear weapons. Once again we are doing the bidding of our great ally on the greatest security threat we face which is nuclear weapons. Check the website of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, ICAN, for more details on this one. I should mention that there are differences between the two biggest political parties on this issue, with Labor – since 2015 – supporting a nuclear weapons ban treaty; the Greens of course support it strongly. I'll also mention that there will be a Women's Ban the Bomb march (everyone welcome) on Saturday June 17; watch for details of that.

And the final group I want to specifically mention is IPAN, the Independent and Peaceful Aust Network, whose name tells you what IPAN is working for. Australia has been constantly at war for over 15 years; being at war is becoming the norm for us. IPAN has a statement calling for Australia to develop independent thinking in our foreign policy and to stay out of US wars, for which signatures are being sought; I urge you to have a look at it and sign it.

If we want our leaders, current and future, to adopt more peaceful, just and compassionate policies, then we are all going to have to work very hard. The past year globally has been a wake-up call, particularly with the election in the US of a man who epitomises the divisive, violent and aggressive policies that are creating such human misery.

The role of civil society is now critical.

Wherever you see your energies being most effective, I urge you to do all that is possible to help create a world that is more just and more peaceful. Together we must redouble our efforts – for the sake of:

- refugees and asylum seekers,
- those caught up in war zones who don't even make it to other shores, and
- all those whose lives are threatened by the new wars that are looming.

And look around to see how alive civil society already is.

In addition we have good parliamentarians; they are invaluable, and they need the support of all of us to help them push for change.

Good journalists need support also, and I think one of the best things we can do for peace and justice is to make sure that truth survives as one of our most important values. Support good journalism; subscribe to publications that are delivering it, and be prepared to pay for it to the extent that you can. Good journalists are our lifeline to a world that is not post-factual or post-truth but is in factual and truthful.

I am going to finish with the words of Dr Bernard Lown, co-founder of International Physicians for the Prevention of War, who urged us all to "Never whisper in the presence of wrong". That's our challenge.

Thank you.