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Does Militarism Lead to Violence? Case Study: Djibouti

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Overview

Djibouti hosts several foreign military bases for France, Germany, Japan, Spain, the United States, and soon China. The US base, Camp Lemonnier, and the nearby Chabelley airfield is currently the biggest. The number of US military personnel stationed there has increased by 450 percent since 2002 and has expanded from 88 acres to nearly 200 acres. Among other things, this base has been a focal point of the US military's drone operations in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, from which it carries out strikes in Somalia and Yemen.

In addition to drone strikes and other military operations, the presence of foreign militaries and private military and security contractors in Djibouti is a driving factor in the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the region. About 100,000 migrants pass through Djibouti every year and thousands of Somali refugees live in camps. Trafficking, rape, and prostitution of migrant and refugee women is an open secret that in recent years has been downplayed by the US government in its own Trafficking in Persons Reports. The latest report reflects a more realistic picture, but it is yet unclear what repercussions this will have on US-Djibouti relations or the financial and military relationship between the two countries.

Challenges

The structural context of the problem in Djibouti includes militarism, violent masculinities, and sexual abuse. The combination of high numbers of foreign military personnel and flows of migrants and refugees vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation creates a powder keg for gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence.

The institutionalisation of the sex industry around military bases influences the identities and behaviour of soldiers as men. It draws on and intensifies existing gender norms and it helps shape and define the process of dehumanisation of others promoted by military training that helps facilitate killing, including through very dehumanising methods of remote warfare such as drone strikes.



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Another structural challenge in Djibouti is that the country has become a militarist rentier economy. Djibouti hosts at least six foreign military bases, which pull in at least USD \$300 million annually in lease fees. Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds of the Djiboutian population lives in poverty and half the labour force is unemployed. Within this context of high levels of militarism and poverty, respect for human rights is also a major issue.

What are women doing to create change?

Two Dutch journalists, Hannah Kooy and Sanne Terlingen of OneWorld.nl, have exposed the connection between trafficking in Djibouti and the military bases.

Impact

WILPF is seeking to bring this case to the attention of the Human Rights Council; anti-trafficking bodies; women, peace and security forums; disarmament and arms control forums; and the public in an effort to bring scrutiny and change to the situation.

Our report and advocacy will be based on research about trafficking and sexual violence in Djibouti; aspects of remote warfare conducted from Djibouti; and the economics of the foreign military bases.

Lessons learned/recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The US government conduct transparent and accurate assessments in the Trafficking in Person Reports and credibly follow up these reports in terms of their relationship with Djibouti;
- All foreign military bases by all countries be closed;
- International rules and standards on armed drones be developed; and
- Actions, campaigns, and educational initiatives against gender-based violence, including sexual violence, and against violent masculinities be supported.

To learn more

- Hannah Kooy and Sanne Terlingen, Fear and loathing in Djibouti, OneWorld.nl, http://longreads.oneworld.nl/en/Djibouti_trafficking/



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- Nick Turse, "Target Africa: The U.S. military's expanding footprint in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula," The Drone Papers, The Intercept, 15 October 2015. Available: <https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/target-africa/>