

**Senate Estimates Opening Statement  
June 2023  
Secretary Adams**

Good morning to the Committee and thank you for the opportunity to make some opening remarks.

The department continues to work hard to deliver outcomes that serve Australia and all Australians in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing geostrategic environment.

Since the last Estimates in February, we have provided humanitarian crisis support in response to tropical cyclones in Vanuatu, Myanmar, Bangladesh and New Zealand.

We have made progress in stabilising ties with China, re-establishing high-level exchanges and dialogue to progress our interests both frankly and directly.

And we led government efforts to evacuate Australians from conflict in Sudan, helping 278 Australians and their family members depart safely, including on two ADF flights and a number of other UK and other partner country flights, convoys and ferries.

The release of Dr Kenneth Elliott, after being held hostage for over seven years, reflected sustained hard work by many officials in DFAT and other government agencies. They never gave up their effort and commitment to securing his release. I would like to acknowledge the strength and resilience of Dr Elliott and members of his family through the most difficult of circumstances.

Australians have been travelling overseas in large numbers. From February to April this year, over 1.8 million Australian citizens have departed the country – around 86 per cent of 2019 levels. DFAT's consular assistance to Australians overseas has also risen during this period with new consular cases averaging above 600 per month.

Passport demand continues to be around 25 per cent higher than pre-pandemic levels. But we are processing over 95 per cent of routine passports within 10 business days and 98 per cent of priority passports within 2 business days. Our diplomatic missions and staff in Canberra have supported a high tempo of ministerial and leader-level visits both incoming and outgoing.

DFAT has worked hard with other agencies to coordinate Pacific policy across all arms of statecraft - economic, diplomatic, defence and development. The \$1.9 billion Enhancing Pacific Engagement package announced in the 2023-24 Budget builds on our long-standing contributions to regional stability and respond to Pacific priorities.

DFAT has played a key role in deepening Australia's ties with Southeast Asia, including:

- working to elevate partnerships with Vietnam, the Philippines and Laos
- supporting extensive consultations by Special Envoy Nicholas Moore to inform the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040; and
- implementing the \$55.7 million package announced in the Budget to deepen engagement with the region.

In the trade and investment space, DFAT continues to work to open up new opportunities for Australian business including:

- implementing the Australia-UK Free Trade Agreement,
- finalising an ambitious and comprehensive trade agreement with the EU,
- continuing work on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) – with the 13 members concluding a first-of-its-kind agreement to address modern supply chain challenges last week; and
- advancing negotiations of a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with India.

As the Committee knows, we are facing an increasingly complex international environment shaped by rising competition. But as the Foreign Minister has said, we are not passive bystanders – we can shape the kind of region that we want to live in.

We in DFAT are focused on building the capabilities that DFAT will need to advance Australia's interests and values internationally and to protect and grow Australia's security and prosperity.

The 2023-24 Budget supports objectives of the department's Capability Plan including through investments in our diplomatic, trade and development capabilities. These measures complement the steps my department is already taking – including through changes to workforce planning, culture and business processes - aimed at strengthening our diplomatic network and lifting capability.

To close, I would like to acknowledge the hard work of my department's dedicated staff, particularly those who may work in lower profile but vital roles across the department to prosecute Australia's national interests globally in support of our collective security and prosperity.

Thank you Chair, thank you Committee, I welcome your questions.