

CDF Opening Statement to Senate Estimates (14 Feb 24)

Thank you Secretary.

Chair, Senators, all,

Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide is an extremely important inquiry. The recommendations accepted by Government will present an opportunity to strengthen our approach to the welfare of serving and ex-serving personnel.

As at 12 February, Defence has provided approximately 185,000 documents consisting of approximately 3.1 million pages in response to 637 notices from the Royal Commission.

56% of Notices have been fully responded to by the due date, additionally 28% have been fully responded to within 14 days of the due date, and 16% have been responded to later than 14 days. One individual request – requiring more than two million pages of documents – represents the bulk of the late responses. In the release of documents, where Defence is the decision maker all documents are being provided.

Defence has also provided over 3,500 written answers to questions on notice, supported 133 witness appearances at public hearings, and facilitated 27 visits to Defence establishments for the Royal Commissioners and their staff.

Many of the ADF's senior leaders will again be giving further evidence to the Royal Commission at the next hearing block scheduled from 04-28 March. I want to thank Defence personnel, veterans, and their families for their contribution and courage in participating.

Retention and Recruitment

Defence is addressing retention and recruitment as a priority. As at 1 January 2024, the ADF is 6.9 per cent – 4,308 people – below its authorised strength. Inflow rates remain below the level required to maintain our current force.

Recruiting performance is very highly correlated with unemployment. Low unemployment, low recruiting; and vice versa.

Considerable effort and innovation continues to inform changes to our recruiting system, focused in four areas of activity:

- Widening the aperture of eligibility to increase the number of potential applicants who might join the ADF, including through consideration of non-citizen enlistment on a pathway to citizenship;
- Increasing the capacity of the recruiting system to manage a greater volume of applicants;
- Improving recruiting processes to accelerate the time taken to recruit; and
- Encouraging our people to remain in service through targeted retention initiatives.

There have been some early encouraging results:

- Separation rates have declined from a high of 11.6% to 10.0% at 01 February 2024.
- The size of our Air Force is at a 20-year high;
- The Australian Defence Force Academy has just commenced one of its largest intakes of Trainee Officers; and
- Last year, Army graduated its largest cohort from the Royal Military College.

Current Operations

Domestic

Operationally over the December to January period, Defence has provided specialist support to domestic disaster response and relief efforts at the request of Government.

Our targeted contribution supports civilian capacity, but does not replace it. Recently the ADF has assisted Australians affected by severe weather events, including tropical cyclones Jasper and Kirrily. ADF personnel have supported evacuations, transported emergency services personnel, contributed planning staff, and provided community welfare support.

Indo-Pacific

Internationally, our primary focus remains the Indo-Pacific region. The ADF has maintained a robust programme of international engagement throughout the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and North Asia for decades.

Last month, HMAS *Warramunga* departed Sydney for a three-month deployment through South and Southeast Asia. The ship's 200-strong company will participate in a range of exercises and joint patrols with our partners throughout the region.

The Secretary also highlighted our recent contribution to exercises alongside the United States and Japan, as well as our ongoing commitment to enforcing United Nations sanctions on North Korea.

Middle East

Further afield, Australia's deployments in the Middle East reflect our longstanding support for the region's security and stability.

Under Operation BEECH, Defence has deployed aircraft to assist 394 Australians and their families depart Israel since 15 October 2023.

Defence is also contributing up to 16 personnel to the Combined Maritime Forces multinational maritime partnership alongside 40 other nations to protect freedom of navigation and free and open trade, with

our recent uplift in personnel focussed on supporting the US-led coalition Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN in the Red Sea and vicinity.

And our personnel assigned to Operation PALADIN (UNTSO), Operation MAZURKA (MFO), and Operation FORTITUDE continue their peacekeeping roles. Two notable senior appointments have been made: Force Commander of the Multinational Force and Observers, Major General Mick Garraway and United Nations Deputy Military Adviser for Peacekeeping Operations, Major General Cheryl Pearce.

Ukraine

In Europe, Australia has committed more than \$730 million of military assistance to Ukraine and \$910 million in total. This includes 56 M113 armoured vehicles, 14 Special Operations Vehicles, 28 Rheinmetall 40M medium trucks, 14 trailers, and 120 Bushmasters.

Under Operation KUDU we have deployed approximately 370 personnel to the United Kingdom since January 2023 to support training for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Our most recent rotation consists of approximately 90 personnel and has been expanded to include a junior leader training programme.

Operation KUDU also includes the deployment of an E-7A Wedgetail aircraft to Europe in support of multinational efforts to protect a vital gateway of international humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine.

Close

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our serving personnel for the valuable contribution they make every day to Australia and our national interests.

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