

## **CDF Senate Estimates Opening Statement**

26 February 2025

Thank you, Chair,

### **Retention and Recruitment**

The retention and recruiting of our workforce remains a priority. The ADF offers an appealing, rewarding, and unique career choice. Defence continues to explore opportunities to attract the widest possible range of applicants, and we are committed to investing in our people and community.

In the last 12 months more than 69,000 people applied to join the ADF, representing an increase of more than 18% from the previous 12 months. For the financial year 2024-2025, Defence Force Recruiting is forecasting in the order of more than 5,800 full-time enlistments. For context, Defence recruited has not recruited more full-time personnel since the early 2000s.

Additionally, there are more than 650 active applications from citizens of Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States who have applied since Defence launched the non-citizen recruitment initiative for permanent residents.

As at 01 February 2025, the separation rate from the permanent ADF is 9%, down from 10% in the previous year and below the long-term (ten-year) average of 9.7%.

Our people are our most important capability, and these are promising indicators that we are beginning to recruit and retain the skilled workforce that we need to grow the ADF and achieve our mission. Defence will continue to prioritise a culture that enables high-performing teams and meets the challenges outlined in the *National Defence Strategy*.

## **Royal Commission**

To generate that team and culture, Defence has actively sought to build a safe and respectful environment to support our workforce.

This was clearly identified in the *National Defence Strategy* and drives our determination to implement the reforms the Government agreed to in response to the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Defence worked closely with other departments to support the Government's response by 02 December 2024. – just 12 weeks after receiving the Final Report. This was the result of a team effort across multiple areas of Defence, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and other Commonwealth agencies. I commend them all for their dedication and focus.

Defence has now established the Implementation Program Board (which I chair) to ensure that reforms are implemented thoroughly and with the urgency they deserve. The Board has agreed to the first ten Reform Management Plans and will continue to assess this work at pace, with direction from the recently established Commonwealth Taskforce in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The reforms agreed to in the Government's response are significant in scale and complexity, and this will be an enduring multi-year process that Defence and other departments are committed to.

## **ADF Operations**

Turning to operations, the ADF continued a busy schedule of activity over the summer period.

In December, the ADF facilitated the repatriation of 686 people and transported more than 88,000 kilograms of emergency stores and support personnel from across government as part of the DFAT-led response to the devastating earthquake in Vanuatu.

The ADF also recommenced Operation Southern Discovery – delivering essential equipment and supplies to Antarctica as part of our enduring support to the Australian Antarctic Program.

Earlier this month, Defence supported the Queensland Government's response to flooding in the north of the state. ADF rotary wing assets, alongside support from the Republic of Singapore Air Force, moved more than 200,000 kilograms of stores. The ADF also constructed a temporary bridge to enable critical supplies to communities isolated by damage to the Bruce Highway.

Further afield, HMAS *Brisbane* successfully conducted a Tomahawk missile launch while exercising with the United States Navy in December. This follows Navy's successful SM6 and NSM launches and is a clear demonstration of our focused effort to enhance Navy's lethality.

More recently, HMAS *Hobart* has undertaken a series of engagements with international partners during the first regional presence deployment for 2025. *Hobart* has participated in Exercise Komodo led by Indonesia, Exercise La Perouse led by France, and a multilateral maritime cooperative activity led by the Philippines. These exercises demonstrate Australia's commitment and ability to maintain a regular presence in the region and work alongside our international partners to support security and stability.

One of our maritime patrol aircraft recently experienced an unsafe and unprofessional incident while conducting a maritime surveillance patrol in the South China Sea. This incident with a People's Liberation Army - Air Force aircraft posed a serious risk to the ADF personnel. Australia expects all militaries to operate in a safe and professional manner to avoid the risk of serious accidents.

Separately, Defence always monitors foreign military activity in proximity to Australia. This includes the current People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N) task group, consisting of the Jiangkai-class frigate *Hengyang*, the Renhai-class Cruiser *Zunyi*, and the Fuchi-class replenishment vessel *Weishanhu*. The task group is operating south of Australia, having transited down the east coast.

As at this morning it is transiting approximately 136 nautical miles (roughly 252 kilometres) from Hobart, travelling Southwest.

As has been publically reported, this task group conducted two declared live fire activities (both outside Australia's exclusive economic zone): on Friday 21 February and on Saturday 22 February. Although the task group advised their live firing intentions at the time in accordance with international convention, the absence of any advance notice to Australian authorities was of concern – notably that the limited notice provided by the PLA-N could have unnecessarily increased the risk to aircraft and vessels in the area. In order to best minimise disruption to aircraft and vessels nearby, notice and early promulgation of high seas fires prior to the activity would have mitigated any perceived risk and is a best practice approach adopted by the ADF. Defence is not aware of a Notice to Airmen or Notice to Mariners issued by the PLA-N for either live firing activity.

The PLA-N is entitled to exercise freedom of navigation consistent with international law. We will continue to actively monitor their activities as they transit near Australia.

Lastly, Operation Okra (Defence's contribution to the international coalition against Daesh) concluded in December 2024. Since 2014, the ADF deployed more than 4,800 personnel to the Middle East under Operation Okra. Their commitment is a clear demonstration of Australia's resolve to support international efforts against terrorism and violent extremism.

I would like to thank every member involved in these important operations and exercises for their contributions. Your service directly supports Defence's mission, and throughout 2025 the ADF will continue a robust program of activities and international engagement to defend Australia and its national interests.

Thank you.