**Budget Estimates October 2020: Opening Statement by Frances Adamson, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**

Thank you Chair, for the opportunity to provide an opening statement. Since our last appearance before this committee, the context in which the department operates has been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are facing a world characterised by sharpened major power strategic competition, global economic recession and disrupted supply chains. Nations have turned inwards, protectionism has risen, and divisions have sharpened. The competition for power and influence in our region has intensified.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade remains integral to Australia’s task of supporting a regional order where independent, sovereign states are resilient to coercion. Through our bilateral, regional, global and multilateral work we act to uphold and promote human rights, universal access to safe and effective vaccines, rules-based trade, and global cooperation free from coercion. Where states disagree or are in dispute, Australia believes international law should be the basis for resolution. Even in crisis response mode, these principles remain fundamental to our work.

You will hear over the next couple of days that the department’s central role in the delivery of Government priorities has never been more important. A strong and effective foreign service is vital to navigating Australia’s course through our changed world and prosecuting our interests at home and in our neighbourhood.

We have never before operated at the speed and scale demanded of us this year. Our consular effort in Canberra and at posts has been immense. DFAT staff overseas have provided non-stop services to Australians in need throughout the pandemic. Our staff have worked tirelessly, living and working under lock down conditions for many months, often without their families close by and with some falling ill with COVID-19. I acknowledge that our response has sometimes fallen short, but I am extremely proud of our overseas network and the department as a whole.

The department has been, and will continue to be, on the frontline of the Australian Government’s response to COVID-19:

* supporting Australians at home and abroad,
* supporting our economy and businesses and
* supporting our Indo-Pacific neighbours.

Our top priority continues to be helping Australians overseas, in what is the largest consular operation in our history. Since March, we have supported around 30,000 Australians and permanent residents to return on 357 flights, 66 of which have been facilitated by the Government.

We continue to work on options to bring home as many Australians as we can. A DFAT-led taskforce is solely focused on this effort. In the past week, the department has facilitated two commercial flights that have brought home 344 Australians from London and New Delhi, prioritising the most vulnerable. More flights will follow.

Our colleagues in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet are working with states and territories to safely lift quarantine capacity, with details settled at National Cabinet. This will enable DFAT to help more Australians return home. We continue to provide advice, information and support so Australians who remain overseas can decide what’s right for them.

In addition, the department is also supporting Australians at home – we are focused on the central role we play in Australia’s economic recovery, including restarting our Pacific labour mobility program and helping alleviate persistent workforce shortages in key sectors of the Australian economy. And we are working in close partnership with our Indo-Pacific neighbours through our transformed development program – Partnerships for Recovery – to support the region’s health security, economic recovery and stability.

We remain focussed on delivering as effectively and efficiently as possible, ensuring our resources and efforts are concentrated on the Government’s highest priorities. Vital new funding in this year’s Budget will support our focus on Australia’s economic recovery and the security of Australia and Australians.