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ACTING CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**Opening Statement
Budget Estimates Hearing**

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Good morning Senators, as you are aware, the Chief of the Defence Force is currently in Washington attending meetings with 75 Global Coalition partners to discuss our ongoing efforts to counter violent extremism. I will be representing Air Chief Marshal Binskin today in my capacity as the Acting Chief of the Defence Force.

Senators, this month marks three years since the Australian Defence Force commenced air operations in Iraq. On the 9 October, 2014, the Australian Air Task Group flew the first of nearly 4,100 sorties flown since. Operation OKRA, as it is known, has evolved at the Iraqi Government's request, to include the Special Operation Task Group's Advise and Assist mission and the combined Australian-New Zealand Building Partner Capacity mission at Taji.

In that time, Australian personnel have helped the Iraqi Security Forces to liberate six million civilians who were trapped and forced to live under the inhumane control of Daesh. They have provided military support and training that has enabled the Iraqis to retake Mosul, Tal Afar, Hawija and Fallujah. Across Iraq and Syria, Daesh has lost around 83 percent of the territory once controlled under the murderous caliphate. The self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa has fallen and the five-month long siege in the Philippines' city of Marwari is now over. These victories demonstrate significant progress in what is the global fight against Daesh. The terrorists are on the back-foot, but it is not the end of the fight.

Some of the remaining Daesh strongholds are in difficult terrain and present different tactical problems from the urban fighting experienced to date in cities such as Mosul and Raqqa. Australia and the Global Coalition remain an important element in the fight against terrorism. We must maintain the momentum and continue to eradicate Daesh and other violent extremists wherever they seek to take root.

Experience has shown us that we also need to continue to strengthen the local military and security forces, who are very much on the front line so that they have the skills necessary to hold territory and maintain security. This is the focus of much of our work in Iraq and of our ongoing efforts in Afghanistan, where the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces have had responsibility for security since January 2015.

Afghanistan remains difficult and complex. While the Taliban is still considered the largest threat, Islamic State Khorasan Province is fighting for a foothold. Our contribution there is focussed specifically on training, advising and assisting the Afghan forces to defend their country from these threats and other de-stabilising influences. From time-to-time there are setbacks, including in Uruzgan province but we should be encouraged by that fact that throughout the 2017 fighting season Afghan security forces prevented the Taliban from its strategic objective of capturing provincial centres such as Tarin Kot and this has allowed the Afghan Government to retain control of all key military and civilian infrastructure.

Long term improvement, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, can only occur when military efforts are supported by a wider political, diplomatic, economic, and security strategy. Australia's security strategy includes a maritime component to our operations in the Middle East.

The Royal Australian Navy has had a near continuous presence in that region since 1990. Our ships and their crews primarily conduct counter-terrorism, counter-piracy and in recent years, counter-narcotic operations. This is not the only focus; last month, HMAS *Newcastle* completed a two week attachment with the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet in the Arabian Gulf. *Newcastle* supported the USS *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group (CSG-11), escorting the ships safely through the Gulf. The attachment also provided an opportunity for *Newcastle* to conduct a number of flying serials with her embarked MH-60 Romeo helicopter and, for the first time on operations, the Scaneagle Unmanned aerial system.

We have maintained these commitments in the Middle East Region while continuing to work in Australia and the near region. Yet there has been some commentary in recent weeks regarding what others perceive to be an inadequate level of regional engagement. Senators, in addition to our regular ship transits and port visits, over the past six months the ADF has conducted four operations, including Operation HANNAH in support of the Papua New Guinea national election and most recently, Operation VANUATU ASSIST in response to the Ambae Island volcano threat while continuing to support PNG's security preparations for APEC 2018. Additionally, we've also undertaken seven international exercises Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Pacific Protector, Talisman Sabre, Bersama Shield, Balikpapan, AUSINDEX and Southern Katipo. We also commenced one of our most critical regional engagements, deploying two AP-3C Orion aircraft to the Philippines to assist with the fight in the southern Philippines to prevent Daesh-affiliated terrorists from establishing themselves in our region.

Yesterday, as you may have seen, the Minister for Defence and her Philippine counterpart announced an expansion of our assistance to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Under our existing Defence Cooperation Program, the Philippine and Australian defence forces will work together to enhance intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, improve information sharing and conduct counter-terrorism related training in the Philippines as well as here in Australia.

The conflict in the southern Philippines highlights the crucial need for South East Asian nations to proactively work together to counter terrorism in the region. Such cooperation can only be achieved when neighbouring nations have strong, established

relationships built on trust and regular engagement. This is the premise behind the Joint Task Group Indo Pacific Endeavour.

This joint task group is on an 11-week deployment is part of Australia's ongoing efforts to promote security and stability in the region through bilateral and multilateral engagement, training, and capacity building with our key regional partners. After more than a year in the planning, Indo Pacific Endeavour or IPE left Australia on September 4, with six ships and more than 1300 personnel, making it the largest coordinated task group to deploy to the region in more than 40 years.

Indo Pacific Endeavour is only surpassed this year by the combined Australian-US Exercise Talisman Sabre 17 which this year included around 33,000 participants, 36 warships and more than 220 aircraft. One of the key serials in this year's exercise was the combined amphibious assault involving Australian, US and New Zealand forces which was observed by representatives from more than 24 countries.

Senators, the scope and tempo of our operations, exercises and engagements over the past five to six months have been substantial. I'm sure you will agree; our people have done an excellent job with outstanding results. Yet this has not detracted from our commitment to ongoing improvement in mental health care for our people and cultural reform.

In the coming months we will launch the next iteration of Defence's cultural change program *Pathway to Change* following extensive consultation with personnel across all levels of the organisation and earlier this month the Secretary and I released the Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2023 under the banner '*Fit to Fight, Fit to Work, Fit for Life*'. The strategy reinforces the mental health and wellbeing as a priority and builds on the 2011 strategy as well as incorporating the findings of recent reviews and inquiries. Importantly, the new strategy adopts the *One Defence* approach, including Defence's civilian workforce for the first time.

Our aim is to ensure that where people need assistance, appropriate care is available, and that they have the confidence to take that first step in seeking that help.

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