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DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS
Opening Statement
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
Senate Estimates

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At the direction of the Australian Government, the Department and the Australian Border Force (ABF) have been preparing for the reopening of the international border at scale. Fully vaccinated Australian citizens, permanent residents and their families are the most immediate priority, with passenger arrival caps for these travellers to be lifted in NSW and Victoria from 1 November 2021.

In September 2021, a contract was signed with Accenture to deliver the Permissions Capability platform and the first use case, the Digital Passenger Declaration (DPD). Initial operating capability for the DPD will be delivered in December 2021. It will incorporate the Australia Travel Declaration and pilot digitising the existing Incoming Passenger Card (IPC). The DPD will digitally verify the recently-launched International COVID Vaccination Certificate, and will be a key tool in re-opening the international border. From March 2022, the IPC will be completed digitally by all passengers and data collected will continue to be securely shared with State and Territory public health authorities.

Last financial year, the Department delivered 160,052 migration program places, including the largest partner visa program in 25 years. The increased planning level for partner visas supported the reunification of Australians with immediate family members during the pandemic. The migration program also provided Australia with skilled workers to ensure continuity of critical goods and services, supporting Australia's pandemic response and our national economic recovery.

The Department continued to focus on maintaining the integrity of our immigration program. In 2015-16 the refusal rate of applications was 2.5%. With changes in how the Department applies intelligence discovery and analytical tools to the immigration program, the rate of refusal of visa applications has increased since that time. In 2020-21, the refusal rate of applications decided was 3.8%.

More details on achievements in Immigration and Citizenship services can be found in the latest edition of the publication *The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs* which is now available on the Department's website – [The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs \(homeaffairs.gov.au\)](https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au).

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan earlier this year demanded a rapid and coordinated response to ensure the safe return of Australian citizens, permanent residents, visa holders and former Locally Engaged Employees (or LEEs) and their families. I commend the Departmental staff and ABF officers involved in this operation in Kabul facilitating border clearance of evacuees, including identity and security checks. Their efforts contributed to the evacuation of 4,100 people, with more than 3,500 evacuees now residing in Australia. Since 2013, more than 2,000 humanitarian visas have been granted to Afghan Certified LEE and their families, including 787 since January this year.

Last month, a new memorandum of understanding for an enduring regional processing capability in Nauru was signed, underscoring Australia's commitment to regional processing as a key pillar of Operation Sovereign Borders. I thank Nauru for its partnership in hosting a ready capability for any future illegal maritime arrivals who are not turned back at sea or returned otherwise.

By 1 January 2022 regional processing arrangements in Papua New Guinea (PNG) will have transitioned to the PNG Government's independent management. I should like to thank PNG for its longstanding partnership in the fight against maritime people smuggling, and commend its leadership and determination in supporting individuals remaining in PNG along durable migration pathways.

The Department is becoming increasingly concerned about the potential for adversaries to pre-position malicious code in critical infrastructure, particularly in areas such as telecommunications and energy. Such cyber-enabled activities could be used to damage critical networks in the future. The increasingly interconnected nature of Australia's critical infrastructure exposes vulnerabilities which, if targeted, could result in significant consequences for our economy, security and sovereignty. As I have said previously to this Committee and to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS), it is pressing and urgent that the Parliament deals with this problem by way of consideration of the full suite of measures as set out in the Security Legislation Amendment (Critical Infrastructure) Bill 2020. The Department will of course work under the direction of the Government to address the concerns about this Bill which were expressed last month by the PJCIS in its report on the Bill.

The Ransomware Action Plan which was released earlier this month by the Minister for Home Affairs sets out reforms to respond to ransomware and related malware. The Plan includes legislative reforms to ensure that cybercriminals are held to account for their actions, and harsher penalties apply to those who engage in ransomware or target Australia's critical infrastructure.

This month, the Department participated in the International Counter Ransomware Initiative, which was convened by the White House and which brought together over 30 nations to build a global response to the ransomware threat. Australia led a panel discussion on disruption. These like-minded nations have agreed to better coordinate their efforts, and Australia is prepared to lead streams of action in support of this goal – [Joint Country Statement – Counter Ransomware Initiative 2021](#).

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