

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
COVID-19 Inquiry Hearing – 2 September 2020
Opening Statement by DFAT Secretary, Frances Adamson

I welcome this opportunity to appear before the Committee at a time when the work of DFAT has never been more important in delivering for Australia's interests at home and overseas.

The pandemic has re-shaped our operating environment and the way we conduct diplomacy on behalf of Australia, requiring agility and innovative approaches.

We are facing a world of sharpened major power strategic competition, disrupted global supply chains and international trade, renewed challenges to the multilateral system and a worrying rise in protectionist and authoritarian trends.

DFAT has moved swiftly to adapt and re-prioritise our operations in support of core Government priorities during this crisis. DFAT's pandemic response comprises four main pillars: help Australians overseas; help Australians at home; help businesses and economic recovery; and help our neighbours.

In Australia, we have redeployed staff and resources, and maximised our efforts to support Government priorities. Here we deployed 326 staff to other agencies and frontline domestic services and at the peak of the pandemic, redeployed 441 staff within DFAT in support of Australians overseas, our economic recovery and helping our neighbours.

Our global network of around 121 posts, 112 of these managed by DFAT, is at the frontline of this response, maintaining operations in often very challenging circumstances for our staff.

As we returned some staff and dependants to Australia earlier in the year, we supported posts from hubs and with surge 'tiger teams' in Canberra. Where it is safe to do so, we are now returning staff and dependants overseas to maintain sustainable COVID-19 safe operations.

Helping Australians overseas remains our priority in what is the largest consular response in our history. Close to 380,000 Australians and Australian residents have returned home since March – and DFAT assisted over 27,000 Australians access flights, requiring extensive on-the-ground advocacy and liaison by our posts with host governments and airlines.

Notwithstanding the complexities and constraints, we are firmly focused on helping Australians overseas with their return arrangements.

Our network is assisting Australian businesses with commercial and economic insights to navigate disrupted supply chains, and helping to secure and maintain trade routes for critical exports and imports, including PPE. We are working with industry to build resilience to future shocks to global supply chains.

We have intensified our international diplomacy, supporting engagements by the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Trade, Tourism and Investment Minister, and other Ministers, while providing insights and up-to-date information to support Government decision making.

We are advocating to keep global trade open and the trading rules fair, so our businesses can export and compete on a level playing field, within the WTO's rules-based framework.

We are shaping multilateral institutions to better serve Australia's interests and reflect our values. This is exemplified in the Government's success in securing an independent global review into the pandemic's origins to prevent future outbreaks.

We are calling out human rights violations, including through the UN Human Rights Council and working to address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, other vulnerable groups and minorities.

We are pushing back on 'vaccine nationalism' and supporting equitable vaccine access, as exemplified in the Government's \$80 million contribution to the COVAX Facility Advance Market Commitment.

We have reshaped Australia's development program to support our Indo-Pacific neighbours to manage the pandemic, guided by our new 'Partnerships for Recovery' strategy. Such efforts serve our strategic interest in supporting an open, stable, prosperous region, consistent with the objectives outlined in the Foreign Policy White Paper.