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SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS
Opening Statement
Select Committee on COVID-19

Tuesday, 5 May 2020

From the outset of the creation of the Department in December 2017, extensive planning has been undertaken in relation to dealing with catastrophic civil contingencies, including potential health pandemics. Over its first two years of existence, the Department undertook hazard-agnostic planning that could be applied in the event of, *inter alia*, a pandemic. This planning enabled the Department to rapidly respond to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Beginning in early February 2020, our efforts – spearheaded by the Australian Border Force - focused on border measures. As the medical advice to Australian governments, and to the community at large, has made consistently clear, prompt early action at the border was instrumental in enabling Australia to achieve effective control over COVID-19, as such action formed a shield behind which the domestic measures could be applied.

While border responses represented the Department’s primary line of effort at the outset, we also in parallel began to prepare other responses. Drawing on existing national crisis management arrangements, and the civil contingency planning to which I have already referred, the National Coordination Mechanism—NCM—was activated by the Australian Government on 5 March 2020, through which the Department was charged with coordinating all non-health activities in response to COVID-19.

Building on the planning work on catastrophic civil contingencies, and informed by our experience in dealing with fire, flood, storm, terror and cyber-attack, the NCM quickly established itself as a primary pillar of our civil defence response to the pandemic, alongside the public health system, and Defence aid to the civil community, as provided by the Australian Defence Force. I should like to place on

record how honoured I have been to serve alongside my comrades in this campaign, namely the Chief Medical Officer of the Commonwealth, Professor Brendan Murphy, the Acting Secretary of Health, Ms Caroline Edwards, the Chief of the Defence Force, GEN Angus Campbell, and of course my colleagues at the witness table today, the Commissioner of the Australian Border Force, Mr Michael Outram, and the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Mr Andrew Metcalfe. Along with a number of other senior colleagues, I could think of no better band of brothers and sisters with which to face such a daunting challenge.

Supported by the NCM, the Supermarket Taskforce was established by the Department on 18 March 2020 to respond to challenges facing that sector. The Taskforce engaged closely with the industry to agree on key messages to reassure the public that there is no need for ‘panic buying’, while temporarily liberalising store opening hours and trucking curfews to ensure the rapid restocking of shelves. Such is the versatility of the Department that officers who were one week working on critical infrastructure and foreign investment issues, as well as emergency management and disaster risk management, found themselves rapidly becoming expert on the supply chains for toilet paper and hand sanitiser.

To date, the NCM and Supermarket Taskforce have conducted 71 meetings across priority domains, working across the Commonwealth, States and Territories, local government, industry and the not-for-profit sector.

Through Emergency Management Australia, the Department also processed over 60 requests for Commonwealth assistance—mainly for ADF personnel to support State and Territories’ planning; contact tracing; monitoring quarantine compliance; distributing supplies; and establishing State and Territory border control points.

From the outset, the Department, the AFP and other law enforcement partners, were focussed on online safety and the protection of children, as home learning and physical isolation became our new reality. The Department supported the development and promotion of materials to help children, parents and caregivers to stay informed and safe online.

We have also reshaped and reorientated our policy efforts to in relation to the protection of critical infrastructure and systems of national significance from cyber threats, working with the Australian Cyber Security Centre. Other law enforcement and counter-fraud efforts have also been front of mind, with the Department playing a central coordinating role as the convener of the Commonwealth’s criminal justice and law enforcement agencies.

The Department also assessed social media feeds and referred racist material to social media companies to take down and, where applicable, to relevant authorities for investigation. Our efforts to counter misinformation and disinformation have been alert to the risks of foreign interference.

The Department collaborated with SBS to share government information in-language for multicultural communities online and through SBS media. Our Regional Directors and the Community Liaison Officer network have worked closely with State and Territory governments and multicultural community organisations to ensure that vulnerable members of the community are best supported.

The Department's Document Verification Service was mobilised to support Services Australia and the ATO to efficiently deliver JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments. The Government introduced changes within the visa system, allowing international students to extend their ordinary working hours to support critical sectors, including in relation to supporting supermarkets.

While grants of offshore Humanitarian Programme visas have been significantly disrupted, the Department worked with service providers to manage the continuity of settlement services. The Department also implemented online Citizenship ceremonies with over 1,300 people becoming Australian Citizens via video link since 31 March 2020.

These are just some facets of the Department's response to COVID-19. I thank staff for their flexibility, purpose and determination in delivering this work.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that Australia has highly effective public services and institutions of state. No doubt, there will be lessons to be learnt. For all the lessons, we must remember that for Australia to be in this fortuitous position many decisions and actions must have been taken to the good, as against the alternative. The crisis is not over, but with sound planning, effective national responses and the determination of the entire Australian community, catastrophe has been avoided. As Secretary, I am proud of the contribution that the women and men of the Department of Home Affairs have made to this outcome.

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