

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 7 May 2020

AFP Commissioner – Opening statement

Introduction

- Good morning Chair, Committee members, I thank you for the opportunity to make a short opening statement.
- The AFP looks forward to engaging with the Committee during the course of this inquiry, and we will assist in any way we can.
- I would first like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the significant loss of life experienced nationally and internationally as a result of this virus and extend our sympathies to those that have lost loved ones.
- I would also like to pay tribute to the four Victoria Police officers that were tragically killed in the line of duty last month and South Australia Police Detective Superintendent Joanne Shanahan.
- Our hearts go out to their families, friends and colleagues.

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- The AFP is **prepared** and has been **responding** to the challenges of COVID-19.
 - Since the beginning, I have been engaged in weekly meetings with my Commissioner counterparts from around the country, and our Deputies and senior executive are also meeting with their counterparts, sharing experiences and challenges in keeping our communities safe at this time.
 - The AFP Incident Coordination Centre became fully operational on 2 February 2020, with the deployment of 52 officers to Christmas Island, Learmonth and Darwin to

support the repatriation of Australian citizens from Hubei Province in China.

- On 13 March 2020, in response to the rapidly evolving situation, the AFP endorsed Operation PROTECT to lead our 24/7 agency response to protect our people against COVID-19, safeguard Australia's national interests and assist with public safety.
- Since its inception, Operation PROTECT has received over 1,200 tasks requiring action, and provides critical connectivity to national and international law enforcement partners through our geographic commands and international network.
- The AFP also remains sharply focused on targeting, disrupting and preventing criminal activities across all crime types.

Domestic support

- We are supporting our partners through the deployment of offices to assist with biosecurity and border check points, protecting remote indigenous communities, community policing, and assisting with the movement of quarantined citizens returning from overseas.
 - More than 100 officers have been deployed to the Northern Territory.
 - AFP members to ACT Policing and the External Territories of Saibai Island, Cocos Keeling, Christmas Island and Norfolk Island.
 - And we continue to work closely with Commonwealth and state partners to assist with arrivals of repatriated Australians returning from overseas.
- At this challenging time for all of us – the AFP is working tirelessly with our partners to protect the community.
- As part of these efforts, the AFP has joined forces with the Attorney-General's Department's Commonwealth Fraud

Prevention Centre to form the Commonwealth COVID-19 Counter Fraud Taskforce.

- We are focused on identifying, taking action, and preventing fraud against the COVID-19 economic stimulus measures, and any other welfare support program.
- We have established our internal 'Taskforce IRIS' – to target people and organised crime entities who seek to defraud the Government's COVID-19 economic response measures.
 - A Western Sydney man was arrested for allegedly submitting claims for a range of government benefits, designed to assist members of the community affected by COVID-19 and bushfires.
 - He used assumed 11 identities and 53 fictitious identities to submit 68 claims for Government benefits.
 - Total value of claims exceeded \$70,000.
 - The arrest resulted in the man being charged with a range of Commonwealth offences, including obtaining a financial advantage by deception (*section 134.2 (1) of the Criminal Code*)
- The AFP's fraud work is supported by the ongoing work our highly successful Criminal Assets Confiscation Taskforce – the CACT.
 - In the 2019/20 year to date, the CACT has already restrained assets with a value of approximately \$235 million.
- Another key area of focus for the AFP is the prevention and disruption of non-commercial profiteering, and the export of certain goods designated as essential to Australia's COVID-19 response.
 - We've established Taskforce Quadrant with ABF, ACIC and AUSTRAC.

- Focused on proactive engagement, including visits to premises, of export and other targeted businesses.
- Objective is prevention, by educating exporters on the new biosecurity determination and customs export regulations.
- We are also assessing other COVID-related criminality and trends.
- The AFP-led ACCCE has observed the emergence of child abuse forums established as a result of COVID-19 stay at home measures.
 - COVID-19 themed forums, with more than 1,000 members, sharing hundreds of videos and images and discussing their tendencies toward the abuse of children.
 - Data suggests the amount of child abuse material shared on the Dark Net between February and March has doubled from this time last year.
 - AFP has bolstered resources in the ACCCE, including in the Triage Unit, to address the increase in referrals received between October 2019 and March 2020 (**123%** on the corresponding time period last year).
 - The Minister for Home Affairs together with the ACCCE, launched a national online safety initiative including a 'seven day safety challenge' and new ThinkUKnow resources for parents and carers.

Our workforce

- The AFP remains vigilant in ensuring an adequate supply of personal protective equipment is available to our frontline workers and facilitated the purchase and delivery of more than 1.9 million surgical facemasks and hand sanitiser.
- To leverage available resources and flexibly respond to changing demands, we fast tracked our initiative to establish an AFP Reserve Force.

International support

- I am discussing global responses and with a number of key partners, including regular teleconferences with Pacific Island Police Chiefs, recently with Commissioner Lucki in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and with Secretary General Jurgen Stock, from INTERPOL.
- AFP members remain posted throughout the world and we continue our valuable work with partners. The AFP currently has 128 members posted offshore in 32 countries, and 23 members offshore in Australia's External Territories.

Close

- In conclusion, I want to acknowledge our hardworking and dedicated members: they are doing a great job in difficult circumstances, and are working flexibly to maintain operational tempo and continue to achieve operational outcomes focused on keeping us all safe.
- In these times, as ever, the AFP is deeply committed to protecting all Australians.
- Chair, thank you for the opportunity to record upfront the AFP's contribution to the Government's response to COVID-19. Thank you.