

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic 2020

QUESTION ON NOTICE/ Spoken

001 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: Facilitated flights

Senator Gallagher

Question

Dr Webster: As the secretary mentioned, we've facilitated 64 flights by government.

CHAIR: That's by the federal government?

Dr Webster: By the federal government.

CHAIR: Can you tell me when they started? Have they kept going pretty consistently?

Dr Webster: They started with the Wuhan and Yokohama flights at the end of January and in early February. They continue to run except that they have tapered off over the last few weeks.

CHAIR: With the caps?

Dr Webster: With the caps. CHAIR: Perhaps you could take on notice those 64 flights and where they were from.

Dr Webster: Yes, I can provide you with that.

Answer

Since 13 March, the Australian Government has helped over 27,000 Australians citizens and permanent residents return home on more than 342 flights, of which 64 flights were directly facilitated by the Government from the following countries:

Departure country	Number of facilitated flights
Afghanistan	2
Argentina	1
Bangladesh	3
Beirut	3
Bolivia	1
Brazil	1
Cambodia	1
Chile	4
Colombia	2
Ecuador	1
India	13

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Jordan	1
Kenya	1
Kuwait	1
Laos	1
Myanmar	1
Nepal	4
Pakistan	1
Peru	5
Philippines	8
Saudi Arabia	1
Solomon Islands	1
South Africa	2
Turkey	1
United Kingdom	1
Uruguay	2
Vietnam	1

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QUESTION ON NOTICE/ Spoken

002 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: Facilitated flights

Senator Gallagher

Question

CHAIR: In terms of those 18,800 that have indicated that they want to return home where are they coming from mainly?

Dr Webster: That's across the world, but I can give you more detailed data around where they're from. Some of the top countries are India, which you'd probably be aware of. There are about 7½ thousand Australians who are seeking to return home. It's important to remember that in India we have actually helped with about 45 flights bringing home just over 8,000 Australians already.

CHAIR: So 45 of those 64 flights are repatriating Australians from India are they?

Dr Webster: Yes. The Philippines also has a high number of Australians seeking to return, South Africa, Vietnam, and the list goes on. I can also provide you with more granular data there. ...

Dr Webster: Can I make one correction to the record. I previously mentioned the number of flights that we had directly facilitated. It was 64. I mentioned the number from India was 45. Not all of those flights were part of the 64. Thirteen of the flights were part of the 64, and those 13 flights were where we actually underwrote the cost of the flights through Qantas and Qatar. The others were ones where we assisted Australians domestically to get onto the flights. They were private or commercial charter flights. That's just a distinction. So, of the 64, 13 were from India.

Answer

As at 20 August 2020, 18,837 Australians in the following countries have registered their interest to return to Australia:

Country	Number of travellers that have indicated an interest to return to Australia
Afghanistan	13
Argentina	108
Austria	35
Bangladesh	117
Belgium	11
Brazil	166
Cambodia	129
Canada	73
Chile	222

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China	6
Colombia	178
Cook Islands	2
Croatia	14
Cyprus	33
Denmark	27
Egypt	144
Ethiopia	144
Federated States of Micronesia	8
Fiji	137
France	26
Germany	61
Ghana	251
Greece	32
Hong Kong	24
India	7605
Indonesia	104
Iran	7
Iraq	172
Ireland	51
Israel	67
Italy	34
Japan	46
Jordan	138
Kenya	271
Kiribati	13
Kuwait	23
Laos	78
Lebanon	373
Malaysia	196
Malta	30
Mauritius	100
Mexico	108
Morocco	44
Myanmar	110
Nepal	134
Netherlands	33
New Caledonia	23
New Zealand	24
Nigeria	83
Pakistan	516
Palestinian Territories	1
Papua New Guinea	1
Peru	122

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Philippines	1139
Poland	80
Portugal	39
Qatar	17
Republic of Korea	1
Russia	8
Samoa	64
Saudi Arabia	447
Serbia	1
Singapore	19
Solomon Islands	1
South Africa	842
Spain	36
Sri Lanka	42
Sweden	56
Switzerland	28
Taiwan	2
Thailand	1036
Timor-Leste	22
Tonga	7
Trinidad and Tobago	16
Turkey	130
Ukraine	26
United Arab Emirates	291
United Kingdom	1047
United States	162
Vanuatu	34
Vietnam	699
Zimbabwe	77

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

003 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: COVID-19 China posts

Senator Patrick

Question

Senator PATRICK: according to the FOI information that I have. There were only three reports coming from the consulate in Shanghai, and all of them effectively just gave access to or gave reference to websites that were reporting on the spread of the virus. I'm just going back to your first statement, where you said, 'We're engaging with embassies—embassy to embassy or embassy to their foreign ministry.' It just seems to me that the reporting we were getting early on in the piece was perfunctory, in some sense.

Ms Adamson: With the material from the consulate-general in Shanghai, Shanghai has consular responsibility for Hubei province and for Wuhan, so that would have been the reason why it came from there. There was, I think, a growing awareness in the course of January of an issue, and hindsight is, of course, a wonderful thing. But I don't think we were without information that we needed. In fact, I think I would argue the Australian government—ministers and the Prime Minister—were very much on the front foot when it came to our response to this. There are many things which happen across China that our posts report on, and, as you say, 2 January was when it was first drawn to attention.

Senator PATRICK: But during this period we had the World Health Organization raising alerts. We had communications between the Chinese equivalent of the CDC and the US CDC. This thing was well underway internationally, and yet there were only three cables from Shanghai, all just referencing web addresses. Did you actually send any people from Shanghai to Wuhan or to Hubei?

Ms Adamson: I'd have to take that on notice. The normal visits—it's about 1,200 kilometres from Shanghai to Wuhan. We don't have a consulate-general, obviously, in Wuhan. That's why we cover it from Shanghai. They're responsible for other parts of China as well. So I'd need to check on that. But I don't have front of mind that consulate colleagues would have gone to Wuhan immediately to investigate. Their role would have been providing information that was available, and, as you say, the World Health Organization, plus the very capable network of medical specialists and epidemiologists, were alert to this, and one of the reasons they were alert to it, of course, is the experience of SARS in 2003, avian influenza and a range of others. For people who know the background of those—and I remember this myself—any hint of a pandemic—well, the pandemic, of course, came later—or of a virus of concern is always going to be elevated in our consideration.

Answer

On 29 January, three DFAT staff from the Australian Consulate in Shanghai established an office in Wuhan to liaise with local authorities and provide consular assistance to Australians in Hubei

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Province. On 5 February, an additional three officials from the Australian Embassy in Beijing were deployed to Wuhan to assist with flight arrangements.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

004 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: COVID-19 China

Senator Patrick

Question

Senator PATRICK: Did your officials in China contact the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention during that initial period? When was the first contact made with the Chinese CDC? Ms Adamson: I'd have to take that on notice. What I can say, though, is that throughout the process, in this case, embassy colleagues in Beijing have had very regular contact with the World Health Organization people based in China. That was the principal source of information about the virus, and that is where you would normally expect that to be as well.

Answer

During the initial period of the COVID-19 outbreak, DFAT officials in China engaged with World Health Organization officials and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to obtain information and updates. The National Focal Point of Australia first received communications from the Chinese CDC via the International Health Regulations 2007 World Health Organization Event Information Site on 5 January 2020.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

005 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: COVID-19 Ministerial advice

Senator Patrick

Question

Senator PATRICK: On 20 January we made COVID a communicable disease of national significance and started standing up teams. It just seems to me that, the next day, communications were shifted across from Shanghai to Beijing. I wonder whether or not that was a directive. Maybe you could explain why that happened. The second question I have is: on what date did Foreign Affairs first brief the minister and on what date did the first ministerial submission go to the minister?

Ms Adamson: I'll take those questions in relation to the briefing of the minister on notice. On the shift of reporting responsibility, these things are not locked in or fixed in terms of reporting responsibility. Typically, though, an embassy in a capital will lead-report on an issue of national significance. Value will be added, as it continued to be through our consulate general in Shanghai when the global focus was on Wuhan. They were still active in the wide range of functions that flowed from that, including consular advice to Australians and consular assistance. But, at a certain point, of course, the embassy in Beijing then picked it up as a national issue, as an emerging global issue, as an issue with impact potentially on Australia.

Answer

On 2 January 2020, DFAT's Centre for Health Security (CHS) contacted the Foreign Minister's Office by telephone regarding the emergence of cases of viral pneumonia in Wuhan, noting this had been picked up in international media reporting on 1 January and domestic reporting on 2 January.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

006 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: COVID-19 China posts

Senator Patrick

Question

Senator PATRICK: On notice, can you advise whether or not it was initiated by someone in Canberra or in Australia or whether the embassy itself initiated the transfer of reporting responsibility.

Ms Adamson: There was no formal transfer of responsibility. They would have, I am sure, taken the initiative to report. That's what we expect our embassies to do.

Answer

No formal direction was issued to transfer reporting responsibility. Our Embassy in Beijing led on whole-of-China reporting from 21 January, the day the World Health Organisation issued its first COVID-19 situation report.

QUESTION ON NOTICE/ Spoken

007 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: Free Trade Agreements

Senator Paterson

Question

Ms Ward: Thank you, Senator. Of course, the focus we have in the trade teams in DFAT at the moment is very squarely on rebuilding Australia's economy on businesses and on jobs. Trade diversification is obviously something that DFAT has been, through its trade policy, building over a number of years. Of course, the resilience of our economy relies heavily on providing for our very open economy and on building opportunities for those Australian businesses that are in the export game, whether they be goods exporters or services exporters. So our very first and best option in our open economy, which has benefited us so much over so many years, is to continue that process. At the moment, we have 14 free trade agreements which are in force. They do provide preferential trade arrangements with our largest trading partners, and we're continuing—

Senator PATERSON: What proportion of our trade is covered by those agreements?

Ms Ward: At the moment, it's around 80 per cent, if I'm not wrong. I'll take that on notice. The goal, of course, is to build that to around 90 per cent with our largest trading partners. We do have a number of very large FTA negotiations in train at the moment, one with the EU, which has been ongoing for a few years now, and one that has recently started with the United Kingdom. We've also got the RCEP agreement, which is more a regional agreement. That is almost concluded. So this stable of FTAs, if you like, really do provide great opportunities for our businesses.

Answer: Based on the latest available comprehensive data, for the 2019 calendar year, the proportion of Australia's total two-way goods and service trade with countries covered by our concluded free trade agreements was 70.3 per cent.

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

008 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: COVID-19 Consular resources

Senator Siewert

Question

There have been media report that the pandemic is placing an understandable resource burden on the Department, particularly as it relates to the consular assistance that DFAT staff are providing. Can you quantify the resources that DFAT has had to allocate to its consular response to the pandemic thus far?

Answer

The Department reallocated staff to its Consular and Crisis Management Division and established two temporary branches to address the significant consular and crisis management workload associated with the COVID-19 response. It also activated its Crisis Centre and Emergency Call Unit.

Consular and Crisis Management Division's FTE is generally around 79 staff. To respond to COVID-19, staff numbers more than doubled. Approximately 98 additional staff from other areas of the Department provided support to the division at different times.

The Crisis Centre was activated for 40 consecutive days (1 Feb-12 March), including 12 days of 24 hour capacity (1-11, 19 Feb), staffed by 119 Crisis Cadre members drawn from across the Department.

The Emergency Call Unit, which provides surge capacity for the 24/7 Consular Emergency Centre, was activated three times in response to the COVID-19 crisis for a total of 95 days. Approximately 240 ECU operators undertook shifts in the ECU, including from the Department's state and passport offices.

Overseas, the Department has 165 APS staff with consular responsibilities, supported by a further 214 locally engaged staff. However, given the scale of the consular response, many more APS and locally engaged staff, including our Heads of Mission and Post, have supported our consular work in addition to their normal roles.

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

009 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: DFAT budget

Senator Siewert

Question

There has also been media reporting of budget shortfalls leading to a decision to cut 60 full-time staff (through natural attrition). Will the pandemic response place further pressure on DFAT's budget this financial year? Has the Department had to de-prioritise other areas of work? If so, what areas?

Answer

Helping Australians at home and abroad, and helping our region during this time of crisis, is our number one priority. Like all government agencies, DFAT is cognisant of operating in a fiscally constrained environment. In the event that DFAT requires additional funding to undertake critical tasks resulting from COVID-19, we will seek additional funding through established Government processes. We are also constantly re-prioritising our resources and activities to maintain our agility and preparedness to support the Government's agenda. This is the fiscally responsible course of action.

The priorities of countries in our region are being reshaped by the pandemic, and this has required us to change the focus of our efforts. In some cases, existing or planned activities are no longer relevant or cannot proceed due to travel and movement restrictions.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE/ Spoken

011 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 20 August 2020

Topic: Consular portal

Senator Gallagher

Question

CHAIR: Okay. That online portal was put in place recently; is that correct?

Dr Webster: The online portal has been in place since March—I'd have to check the exact date—just to start to get a strong sense of exactly where people were who wished to return or needed help.

Answer

On 21 November we launched the new Smartraveller website with a registration functionality. This registration system which was used to help organise assisted departures for Australians from Wuhan in early February. As the Covid-19 crisis became global, we developed a COVID-19 specific system; the COVID19 Crisis Citizen Information (CCCI) system, which was rolled out on 16 April 2020.