

QUESTION ON NOTICE/ Written

014 – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 – 24 September 2020

Topic: Flight caps

Senator Keneally

Question

For each of the following, please provide the relevant dates the brief was prepared, the title of the brief, and to whom the brief was provided to:

- a. Briefs prepared for Ministers on the impact of introducing the international flight cap, before Prime Minister announced the cap on 10 July 2020.
- b. Briefs prepared internally in your Department for SES members on the impact of introducing the international flight cap, before Prime Minister announced the cap on 10 July 2020.
- c. Briefs prepared for Ministers on the impact of the international flight cap, from 10 July 2020 to 24 September 2020.
- d. Briefs prepared internally in your Department for SES members on the impact of international flight cap, 10 July 2020 to 24 September 2020.
- e. Briefs prepared for Ministers on options for the Commonwealth to provide additional support to the States to manage quarantine for international arrivals other than providing ADF personnel from 10 July 2020 to 24 September 2020.
- f. Briefs prepared internally in your Department for SES members on options for the Commonwealth to provide additional support to the States to manage quarantine for international arrivals other than providing ADF personnel from 10 July 2020 to 24 September 2020.

Answer

- a. Nil.
- b. Nil.
- c. Regular written Ministerial briefs relating to the impact of international flight caps were prepared by DFAT within the specified time period.
- d. Regular internal written briefs relating to the impact of international flight caps were prepared for DFAT SES officers within the specified time period.
- e. Briefing related to quarantine capacity is a matter for other agencies.
- f. Briefing related to quarantine capacity is a matter for other agencies.

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Question

Please provide a detailed explanation of the measures take to evacuate Australians from Wuhan and the Diamond Princess, and your agency's role. Please include the following information:

- a. How many Australians were evacuated and placed in quarantine in each facility?
- b. What were the total costs to Government for the evacuation?
 - i. What was the cost to your agency for the evacuation?
- c. Please provide a detailed outline of the legislative framework/Act used to implement quarantine for these evacuations, and your agency's involvement in implementing quarantine.
- d. Please provide any details of cooperation with States/Territories to implement these evacuations and quarantine by your agency.
 - i. Please include details of any contracts / costs that your agency commissioned the State / Territory to deliver.
- e. Please indicate which agency was responsible for the following – and your agency's relationship / work with these agencies on these topics:
 - i. Managing repatriation flights
 - ii. Managing quarantine facilities
 - iii. Managing the public health aspects of quarantine
- f. Please provide a list of any private contractors, consultants or service providers that were used by your agency to facilitate the evacuation and quarantine of these Australians. Please include the following information:
 - i. Nature of the service being provided
 - ii. Value of the contract
 - iii. Name of the private contractors, consultants or service provider
 - iv. Date the contract between the private contractor, consultant or service provider was signed

Answer

- a. 201 Australians and 43 permanent residents of Australia/foreign nationals were on the first Wuhan assisted departure flight for Learmonth (quarantined on Christmas Island) on 3 February 2020.

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151 Australian nationals, 109 permanent residents of Australia/foreign nationals were on the second Wuhan assisted departure flight for Darwin (quarantined at Howard Springs) on 9 February 2020.

157 Australian nationals and 13 permanent residents/foreign nationals were on the Tokyo (Diamond Princess) assisted departure flight for Darwin (quarantined at Howard Springs) on 20 February 2020.

Additionally, a total of 36 Australian nationals and permanent residents of Australia/foreign nationals left Wuhan on a flight supported by the New Zealand Government on 5 February 2020.

b. The cost to DFAT was: Wuhan \$1.57 million and Tokyo \$1.1 million.

c. Not applicable

d. Not applicable

e. DFAT was responsible for arranging the assisted departure flights from Wuhan and Tokyo, in close coordination with Commonwealth Government agencies responsible for health and border and quarantine arrangements.

f.

- i. Aircraft and crewing
- ii. No more than \$2 million per agreement
- iii. Qantas
- iv. Wuhan 1 agreement – 1 February 2020
Wuhan 2 agreement – 6 February 2020
Tokyo agreement – 19 February 2020

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Question

Is your agency aware of any Australian Government policy, process or procedure that is in place to ensure that stranded Australians will be prioritised over other potential entrants to Australia?

a. *If yes:*

- i. Can you name those policies, processes or procedures?
- ii. When did these policies, processes or procedures come into effect?

b. *If no:*

- i. Are any policies, processes or procedures being prepared to ensure that stranded?

Answer

a. The Government has arranged a number of additional facilitated commercial flights with Qantas from the UK, India, and South Africa to Australia in the coming weeks. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the airlines are ensuring Australians registered with DFAT as 'vulnerable' are given priority access to these limited flights. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has also made available a Special Overseas Hardship Fund, expanding the existing financial assistance program with further emergency assistance for the most vulnerable Australian citizens overseas. It is standing DFAT policy to prioritise, wherever possible, the return of vulnerable people and it has been doing this for those impacted by COVID-19 since March 2020.

- i. COVID-19: Overseas financial assistance (Hardship Program).
The Hardship Program includes two types of interest-free loans to vulnerable Australian citizens and their families overseas: emergency living costs loans, and emergency repatriation loans.
Emergency repatriation loans are available to help cover the costs of commercial flights to Australia, where available. Where a flight to Australia can be arranged, a one-off emergency repatriation loan can help cover the cost of the economy class component. The Australian Government will cover the remaining cost of the ticket. The emergency repatriation loan can be used to secure flights where these are available but fares have increased.
Further information can be found at: <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/COVID-19/covid-19-overseas-financial-assistance>

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- ii. The first facilitated commercial flight following the Government's announcement on 16 October departed from London on 22 October, and the second is due to depart New Delhi on 26 October. The Special Overseas Hardship Program was announced on 2 September 2020.

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Question

In Submission 58 to JSCFADT in relation to the Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence and trade, DFAT said, "The Department expects that the number of Australians registering an interest in returning will continue to increase."

- a. What is the basis for this assessment?
 - i. Can the Department provide any projections of Australians stranded overseas and seeking to return home?

Answer

- a. In the wake of COVID-19, we will be dealing with a more fragile and volatile global environment that presents greater risks for Australians overseas. It is expected that as the impacts of the pandemic continue to affect the global economy, more Australians overseas will seek to return.
 - i. As at 23 September, there were around 26,800 Australians registered with DFAT seeking to return to Australia. As at 30 September, that figure had increased by 1300.

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Question

On 21 August the Prime Minister said that he had tasked the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Defence to bring forward measures to support Australians overseas.

- a. What measures have been brought forward by the department to support Australians overseas?
 - ii. When were these measures brought forward and what agencies were consulted in their development?

Answer

- a. The Government has arranged additional facilitated commercial flights with Qantas from the UK, India, and South Africa to Australia over coming weeks. The first flight departed from London on 22 October. The second flight is due to depart New Delhi on 26 October. The Australian passengers on these initial flights will undertake 14 days quarantine on return at the Howard Springs Quarantine Facility in Darwin. This will supplement the work the Government is doing to increase the weekly caps on quarantine capacity in major centres.
Additionally, the Hardship program was announced by the Government on 2 September 2020. The hardship program provides interest-free loans and grants to support vulnerable Australians overseas trying to return.
 - ii. On 16 August 2020, DFAT was asked to develop measures to expand support to Australians overseas. In preparing these measures, DFAT consulted the Department of Home Affairs, Australian Border Force, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Finance, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, and Services Australia.

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The Foreign Minister announced on 2 September a Hardship Program.

- a. How many Hardship Program loans and grants have been provided by the Department?
- b. How many enquiries and how many applications have been received for financial assistance since 2 September?
- c. Can you please provide a summary of the Program and its eligibility requirements?

Answer

- a. As at 19 October, the Department had approved 906 applications for financial assistance under the Hardship Program.
- b. As at 19 October, the Department had received 1785 applications for financial assistance under the Hardship Program.
- c. The Hardship Program provides further emergency assistance for the most vulnerable Australian citizens overseas. The Department has expanded our existing financial assistance program to provide interest-free loans to vulnerable Australian citizens and their families overseas. Further information about the eligibility requirements are available on the Smartraveller website: <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/COVID-19/covid-19-overseas-financial-assistance>.

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Question

Noting the caps on international arrivals, what is the process by which the Department prioritises requests for assistance from Australians to obtain an airline ticket to Australia?

- a. Are these decisions made by the relevant Australian diplomatic mission in country?
- b. Are these decisions made by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra?
- c. Is the office of the Foreign Minister consulted?
- d. Has the office of the Foreign Minister or any other Federal minister made any representations to any airlines to prioritise any passengers?

Answer

a&b. The Department, in consultation with the relevant Diplomatic mission in country, manages requests for assistance, with priority being given to those Australians most vulnerable. DFAT works with the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, the Department of Home Affairs and airlines to get vulnerable Australians on available seats.

c. No.

d. The Foreign Minister's portfolio agencies in both Canberra and through the overseas network have regularly engaged with airlines on the return to Australia of vulnerable Australians. The Department is unable to comment on the actions of other ministerial offices.