



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PETITIONS

received 23.6.08

THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

19 JUN 2008

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Julia

Dear ~~Madam~~ Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 8 May 2008 regarding a recently submitted petition about Australia's involvement in Iraq.

The Australian Government is fulfilling its longstanding policy to withdraw Australian combat troops from Iraq.

Australia's 550 combat troops from Overwatch Battle Group-West based in Tallil will be withdrawn at the end of their current rotation in mid-2008. Other elements of Australia's military participation will remain – including maritime, air, logistics and the detachments guarding the Australian Embassy. The withdrawal is being undertaken in close consultation with the Governments of the United States, the United Kingdom and Iraq.

The Government remains committed to supporting Iraq, and in the 2008-2009 Budget allocated A\$165 million for an expanded capacity building and humanitarian program for Iraq over the next three years. Measures in this program will focus on three principal areas: responding to the basic humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced Iraqis; supporting international efforts to provide reconstruction assistance; and strengthening government capacity, especially in public financial management, agriculture and police forensics and leadership.

The Australian Government is concerned about the level of violence in Iraq. Australian officials have raised and continue to raise this and other human rights concerns, such as reports of persecution of members of religious and other minorities, with the Government of Iraq. The Australian Government has underlined to the Government of Iraq the need for progress on reconciliation and population security for all religious and ethnic groups, in order to build a stable, prosperous and unified Iraq.

In recognition of the critical resettlement needs of Iraqi refugees, in 2008-09 the Humanitarian Visa Program is being increased to 13,500 places, with 500 places in 2008-09 specifically set aside to assist Iraqi refugees. Australia has also recently announced a visa program for locally engaged employees and their families at risk because of their engagement with the Australian Government. Iraqis who have worked with Australian troops in southern Iraq will be eligible for humanitarian resettlement in Australia, subject to health, character and national security checks.

I would be grateful if you could inform the petitioners accordingly.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Smith