

Australia's continuing involvement in the Middle East

Background

- 3.1 In May 2003 the President of the United States announced that the war in Iraq was over. Since that time, allied forces have occupied Iraq. There are about 800 ADF personnel remaining in the Middle East area of operations 'under trying and difficult conditions to contribute to Iraq's stability and reconstruction.'¹
- 3.2 Australia's contribution to the rehabilitation of Iraq commenced on 16 July 2003 and is known as Operation Catalyst. There is an Australian joint task force headquarters for command of ADF elements deployed in the Middle East which is responsible for both Operation Catalyst and Operation Slipper.
- 3.3 Australia's post war contribution includes:
- an air traffic control detachment at Baghdad International Airport;
 - a security detachment to provide protection and escort for Australian Government personnel;
 - an RAAF C-130 detachment supporting operations in Iraq;
 - an RAAF P-3 Orion detachment supporting both the rehabilitation operation in Iraq and the coalition against terrorism;
 - about 300 personnel on board a navy ship in the Persian Gulf; and

1 Department of Defence, *2002-2003 Defence Annual Report*, 2003, p. 3.

- analyst and technical experts supporting the coalition effort to locate, identify, account for and subsequently destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.²
- 3.4 During Senate Estimates, on 5 November 2003, the Chief of Defence Force reported that there were 258 ADF personnel 'actually in Iraq.'³
- 3.5 On 14 November 2003 the Government announced that it would extend the deployment of the RAAF maritime patrol aircraft in the Middle East by six months. The Defence Minister commented that the 'continued ADF commitment demonstrates the Government's support of the ongoing coalition efforts to rebuild Iraq and transition to self-government.'⁴
- 3.6 Defence conducted a review, with input from coalition partners, of its involvement in the Iraq war. Defence noted that the findings were 'consistently positive in their evaluation of Defence's performance.' The review produced a series of 'lessons learnt' identifying aspects of performance which need to be sustained, aspects which need to be improved and performance shortfalls which need to be addressed. Defence noted that a public version of the review would be released in 'late 2003.'⁵ At the time of the hearing, Defence indicated that it was still preparing the public version. Defence stated:

Some of the lessons learnt were quite obvious and have been drawn out even in earlier discussion today on the importance of air-to-air refuelling. There were lessons learnt on the role of special forces and the ability to be able to fight at night and the importance of a networked force. There were many things, even during the Iraq conflict: for example the relevance of armour for the United States in their operations on the ground. All of those things fed in to our lessons learnt process. Our situation is different; we do not operate in the same way and on the same scale as our coalition partners. But nevertheless, we were able to draw lessons from it.⁶
- 3.7 On 23 February 2004 Defence released the report entitled *The War in Iraq: ADF Operations in the Middle East in 2003* which highlights the key lessons learnt by the ADF and Department of Defence during the conflict.⁷ The

2 Department of Defence, *2002-2003 Defence Annual Report*, 2003, p. 4.

3 Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, Estimates, *Budget Estimates Supplementary Hearing*, 5 November 2003, p. 29.

4 Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Robert Hill, *Media Release*, Australia's Military Commitment to Iraq, 14 November 2003.

5 Department of Defence, *2002-2003 Defence Annual Report*, 2003, p. 4.

6 Mr Shane Carmody, Deputy Secretary, Department of Defence, *Transcript*, p. 22.

7 Senator the Hon Robert Hill, Minister for Defence, *Media Release*, Iraq Lessons Learned, 23 February 2004.

Defence Minister commented that 'many of the lessons learned during Operation Bastille, Falconer and Catalyst have been acted on or fed into ongoing policy development such as the Defence Capability Review.'⁸

Discussion

- 3.8 The two critical issues relating to ADF personnel involved in Operation Catalyst relate to their personal safety, and the expected duration of the operation.
- 3.9 Attacks on coalition forces have at times averaged 30 a day. As at 8 April 2004 US forces as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom have suffered 505 casualties since 1 May 2003. This compares to 138 casualties at the cessation of the war on 30 April 2003.⁹
- 3.10 In relation to the security of ADF personnel, Defence reported that security arrangements for the protection of personnel were 'at the highest level it could be.'¹⁰ During the public hearing, Defence stated:
- The situation in Iraq continues to remain where the threat environment is assessed as high to very high. We work incredibly hard to understand the information and intelligence that comes to us from all of the sources—from the coalition, through our involvement with the local population and through our national sources. We churn that out to try to understand on a day-to-day basis what it means for our people and the threat that is posed to them. We are constantly in a state of reviewing force protection measures to make sure that members of the ADF and the members of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and AusAID et cetera live in the safest possible environment, noting that the environment is one that is inherently unsafe.¹¹
- 3.11 There is no fixed timetable for ADF involvement in Operation Catalyst. The Defence Minister while on a visit to Baghdad commented that 'we don't want Australian forces to be away any longer than is necessary but

8 Senator the Hon Robert Hill, Minister for Defence, *Media Release*, Iraq Lessons Learned, 23 February 2004.

9 US Department of Defense: <http://www.dior.whs.mil/mmid/casualty/castop.htm>

10 General Peter Cosgrove, Chief of Defence Force, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, Estimates, *Budget Estimates Supplementary Hearing Transcript*, 5 November 2003, p. 29.

11 Major General Ken Gillespie, Department of Defence, *Transcript*, p. 26.

at this time we believe there is still considerable work to be done and that therefore, for the time being they will be remaining here.’¹²

- 3.12 The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) advised that the Government should set a clear limit to our commitment in Iraq. ASPI stated:

Australia’s interests in the Iraq situation are significant, but they are not our only or our most important international interests. There are limits to the commitment we can sensibly make to this situation. If all goes well, the Coalition might achieve its objectives in Iraq’s reconstruction and disengage in a timely manner. But if things go badly there is a clear risk that our engagement could drag on indefinitely. Australia would be wise to set a clear limit to its commitment to the reconstruction process.¹³

- 3.13 During the hearing, Defence reiterated its view that there is no ‘end state’ or defined date when ADF deployment will cease. Defence stated:

You can see quite clearly from the situation in Iraq that the job is not finished. There are many factors taking place, last night’s activities not being the least of them, which are going to be signs as to how long the overall requirement might be. Also, the coalition, through Ambassador Bremer, is talking about sovereignty for the Iraqi government, and a time when things will change. What we are doing in that regard is keeping the government constantly apprised of what is happening in the Middle East, and we are managing our own assets on a timed basis. For example, a ship deploys for six months, so we are looking at a rotation in May, if there is to be a rotation. Some time before May, we will go back to government and advise them of the circumstances that exist—the need for our forces, Australian interests et cetera—and they will make a decision as to whether or not we rotate them

- 3.14 The Government confirmed that there was no intention to deploy peacekeepers to Iraq.¹⁴

12 Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Robert Hill, *Press Conference*, Baghdad Convention Centre, Iraq, 10 November 2003, p. 2.

13 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, ‘Building the Peace, Australia and the Future of Iraq’, *ASPI Policy Briefing*, May 2003, p. 18.

14 Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, Estimates, *Budget Estimates Supplementary Hearing*, 5 November 2003, p. 32.

Conclusions

- 3.15 The continuing reports of terrorist attacks and deaths of allied personnel in Iraq is a constant reminder of the risks faced by Australian Government personnel deployed to Iraq. The committee is reassured of the measures taken by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to reduce the risk and protect themselves and other Australian government workers from harm. The committee, however, is not complacent about the risks that our Australian personnel face in what is inherently an unsafe environment. We will continue to monitor the situation and seek briefings from Defence on the security and threat levels existing in Iraq.
- 3.16 In relation to the ADF's expected duration of operation in Iraq, the Government and Opposition have announced their policies on this issue. The committee will continue to seek briefings on the role and operation of ADF personnel in Iraq.