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CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING
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Check against delivery

Senators, the loss of any Australian Defence Force member is felt deeply across the organisation and it has been a difficult few weeks for the Australian Defence Force, in particular for the Australian Army. It is a poignant reminder to us all of the risks our people face on a daily basis and the need to look out for each other. While those matters are under investigation as the Minister said, our thoughts remain with all those affected by recent events as we continue our work, in training, on exercises and on operations.

Today there are more than 2,300 ADF personnel deployed on operations around the world. Like the Minister, over recent months I have also had the opportunity to visit many of the men and women serving overseas. I met the people who are supporting operations from our main base in the Middle East under Operation ACCORDION, as well as accompanying the Minister with the Royal Australian Navy personnel in HMAS *Arunta* who are currently assigned to Operation MANITOU conducting counter piracy and counter narcotic patrols in the Arabian Gulf. I have also spent time on the ground with our trainers in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with some of our Special Forces advisors where I witnessed first hand the international effort to destroy Daesh in what is an extremely complex operating environment.

Since October, the Australian Air Task Group and our Special Operations Task Group have been supporting the Iraqi Security Forces in their battle to retake the city of Mosul. As we predicted, it is a long, arduous and deadly fight. In Mosul alone, it is estimated that around 1,000 Iraqi soldiers have been killed and over 6,000 wounded as they fight to free their own citizens of Iraq from Daesh.

For almost eight months, Iraqi forces have fought street-by-street, house-to-house, door-to-door, to regain control of the city. Yet what is arguably the most difficult fight is yet to come. The Old City, the Old City of Mosul, a 13 square kilometre district of Mosul, is a densely populated web of narrow streets and alleys that will limit the Coalition's ability to support ground forces. With no way out, Old Mosul is expected to be Daesh's last stand in that city.

The situation in Mosul is perilous and Daesh is a ruthless enemy. We know that many Iraqi civilians have been killed as a result of Daesh actions alone in West Mosul. Streets and buildings are booby trapped, and Daesh fighters capture civilians, holding

them hostage in a cowardly attempt to protect themselves, or worse, deliberately stage incidents that cause casualties.

Strike operations to destroy Daesh's combat capability and to enhance Iraqi ground force manoeuvre are crucial to the success of the campaign, but the despicable tactic of deliberately putting civilians in harm's way is designed to complicate and impede Coalition support to the Iraqi Security Forces on the front line.

We are acutely aware of the brutal tactics used by Daesh and, as you are well aware, do our utmost to ensure civilians are clear of targeted locations before and during air strikes.

Ultimately we don't want any civilian casualties, yet there can be no guarantees in a complex operating environment such as Iraq. This was starkly highlighted during a Coalition air strike in Mosul on the 17th of March this year where a large cache of Daesh explosives concealed in a building ignited a massive secondary explosion that caused the building to collapse, killing more than 100 civilians placed in the basement.

As with this particular incident, the US-led Coalition conducts a thorough review of the facts and circumstances of each civilian casualty report in order to assess whether the report is credible or non-credible. Where a civilian casualty report involving Australian force elements is assessed as credible, Defence will, in consultation with our Coalition partners, publicly report the nature of Australian Defence Forces' involvement on completion of this assessment. Where appropriate, we will take remedial action to ensure that as both a nation and as a coalition, we meet our obligations under international humanitarian law.

Senators, in accordance with our position on public reporting, I have received advice that the Coalition has identified a potential civilian casualty incident involving Coalition forces operating in Iraq in late March 2017. While no Australian aircraft were involved in this incident in Mosul, we are working with our partners to assess the extent to which Australian personnel were involved in the Coalition approval process. Given that the Coalition is leading this assessment; I am not at liberty to provide further details at this time, as doing so may unduly influence the assessment process.

Together with our Coalition partners, the ADF is committed to degrading and ultimately defeating the threat posed by Daesh in Iraq and Syria. But unlike Daesh, Australia adheres to the laws of armed conflict and takes enormous care while conducting military operations in support of the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces. Every day, Australian Defence personnel operating in this complex, urban environment take steps to minimise the risk to civilians through careful targeting, rigorous intelligence gathering and disciplined enforcement of the laws of armed conflict.

Senators, protecting civilians and defending those who cannot defend themselves is fundamental to what we do.

The training we provide to our partnered Iraqi Security Forces includes mentoring and training in professional military conduct, including the Law of Armed Conflict and Rules of Engagement. It is an important part of our assistance program, and our commitment to the protection of human rights which also extends to our train, advise and assist mission in Afghanistan.

With regard to Afghanistan, as the Minister has outlined, the Government has agreed to a modest increase in the number of ADF advisors to assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces as they continue to develop a sustainable capability for their future. The international community recognises the importance of our continued assistance and remains committed to supporting long-term security and stability for the people of Afghanistan.

Turning closer to home, at the end of June, Australia's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, known as RAMSI will close, after almost 14 years.

Over a decade, more than 7,200 ADF personnel deployed to the Solomon Islands under Operation ANODE, working with colleagues from the New Zealand and Papua New Guinea Defence Forces, and the Tongan Defence Services in support of the whole-of-government mission. From an ADF perspective, RAMSI demonstrated our ability to integrate Regular and Reserve units on operations. It is important to note that around one third of all those ADF members who deployed to the Solomon Islands during that period were Reservists.

Commemorations to mark the conclusion of RAMSI will highlight the improvement in security in the Solomons and the remote response model established to rapidly address complex security situations as they may arise, in conjunction with our regional partners and across government.

However, the end of mission does not signal the end of our engagement with the Solomon Islands. Australia maintains an enduring Defence relationship through our Defence Cooperation Program, training and exercises.

Finally Senators, I would like to add to the chorus of congratulations over the last few weeks, and here this morning, for former Secretary Dennis Richardson on his recent retirement. I have enjoyed working closely with Dennis since he joined the Department of Defence in October 2012 – first in my role as Vice Chief and over the past three years as Chief of the Defence Force. I, along with the Department, have benefitted from Dennis' enormous breadth of experience, knowledge and his unique style of diplomacy. I wish Dennis and his wife Betty all the best for his retirement – I simply note, we will miss his wisdom and his wit around the corridors of Russell.

ENDS