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Good morning Senators, thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement. I would like to use this time to provide you with a brief update on our major operations around the globe.

Senators recent events in Afghanistan highlight the ongoing dangers facing the Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on Operation HIGHROAD.

Despite the shift from combat operations to a train, advise and assist role, our people continue to operate in a very difficult, complex and dangerous environment. Over the past month, a number of US, UK, French and Afghan personnel were killed in two aircraft accidents, and the Taliban staged a high profile assault on the city of Kunduz in Northern Afghanistan.

I understand the Taliban offensive in Kunduz may have raised questions about the timing of Australia's drawdown from the 205th Corps Coalition Advisory Team. But first, let me say that the decision to end our training and advisory mission in Kandahar is part of the broader, NATO-led drawdown from a regional to a Kabul-based presence.

The Afghan National Army 205th Corps is now conducting full independent operations, making it one of the first Afghan Army Corps to operate without Coalition mentors in immediate support. However, this does not mean the end of NATO's relationship with the 205 Corps. Advisory support will continue on a weekly, rather than daily basis and a small number of ADF personnel will remain in Kandahar as part of our embedded personnel at the US-led Train Advise Assist Command – South.

While a small number of ADF personnel will remain in Kandahar, the majority of people deployed on Operation HIGHROAD will continue to be based in Kabul providing training, advice and assistance to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy and General Command Police Special Units along with staff who are embedded in NATO Resolute Support Headquarters.

Last week I met with my new US counterpart, General Joe Dunford, in Boston. Among a of range issues that we discussed, we discussed the future of our respective nations' contribution in Afghanistan beyond the end of NATO's current *Resolute Support* mission in 2016. As you would be aware, President Obama has announced his intention to readjust the planned drawdown of American troops, retaining the current number of around 9,800 throughout much of next year then drawing down to around 5,500 personnel in counter terrorism and training roles in 2017. Australia has committed to the current train, advise and assist mission through to the end of next

year. Our advice to Government regarding any potential Australian contribution beyond that date will be made with full consideration of the US and NATO decisions.

General Dunford and I also discussed Coalition operations against Daesh in Iraq, including the recent extension of Australian air operations in Syria. As part of the multi-national force, our strike missions play an important part in the ongoing effort to disrupt and degrade the Daesh terrorist network.

Senators, since the last Estimates Hearing, Russia has entered the battle-space in Syria.

In a strictly operational sense, Russia's military actions add another layer of complexity to operations in Syria. Our focus remains on ensuring the safety of our aircrew in coalition operations to counter Daesh, and we support the newly established air safety procedures between Russian and coalition forces. Preventing miscalculation and ensuring the safety of our ADF personnel is paramount, and we are continually assessing the operational threat environment.

The Australian Air Task Group is well briefed on all potential threats and our aircrew and planners incorporate this information into their mission preparations, which are designed to minimise those threats. The Air Task Group is also equipped with highly sophisticated and modern aircraft, and our aircrew are well trained to respond to any contingency.

The assessment from commanders on the ground is that Daesh no longer possesses the operational initiative it held over Iraqi forces when the Coalition commenced air strikes just over 12 months ago.

In June last year, Daesh had perceived level of invulnerability. Baghdad International Airport was at risk of being taken and there was real concern the city of Baghdad itself, or parts of it, would fall. The Yazidis had fled and were stranded without food or shelter on Mount Sinjar and the Turkmen were besieged in the town of Amerli.

Today, Daesh fighters are reluctant to show themselves and while there are occasional setbacks, with Coalition support; the Iraqi Security Forces have greater control over the pace of operations - not Daesh. It's still a difficult fight, but the Iraqis are enacting their own tactical plan on their terms and their timelines. Thirty percent of territory held by Daesh has been retaken by Iraqi or Kurdish forces.

Although Australian forces are not directly engaged in independent combat operations, our training and support missions are helping the Iraqis achieve significant operational objectives.

The Australian trained and supported Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service remains actively involved in operations around the city of Ramadi, using skills acquired and refined during Advise and Assist training to recapture Anbar University. This complex, but significant objective demonstrates the Iraqi Security Forces' growing capability.

Iraq's military leaders assess that personnel who have completed Coalition-led training programs perform at a higher standard, with greater skill, confidence and resilience. Since the Advise and Assist mission formally commenced last November, the Australian Special Operations Task Group has qualified over 800 Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service personnel in advanced combat tactics and casualty care as well as dealing with explosive hazards.

The combined Australian - New Zealand Building Partner Capacity Mission, known as Task Group Taji, has now trained more than 2,100 regular Iraqi soldiers; including 200 Non-Commissioned Officers who graduated last month from a Junior Leaders Course. It's been a demanding mission for the first Task Group Taji rotation which will return home in the coming weeks. They prepare to hand over knowing that collectively, Australia's training and advisory missions are improving the capability and resilience of the Iraqi forces who are ultimately responsible for defeating Daesh.

With regard to Operation MANITOU, we continue to achieve outstanding result. This year alone, successive Royal Australian Navy ships assigned to the Combined Maritime Forces have seized almost two tonnes of heroin [1,870kg] worth more than half a billion dollars [\$551,650,000] on the open market. This important work removes illicit drugs from our streets and in doing so, strips money from terrorist networks and criminal operations in the region.

It has also provided an important and highly valued contribution to an International Coalition of 30 partner nations and other agencies such as the United Nations, NATO and European Union whilst fostering important relations through the Middle East and Indian Ocean region.

Outside the Middle East Region, the ADF's largest commitment is to domestic border protection under Operation RESOLUTE. The newly established Australian Border Force has not changed our contribution to the Whole of Government approach to border protection or our altered our interaction with other agencies engaged in such operations.

On average, 600 ADF personnel are assigned to Operation RESOLUTE with five to six Minor War Vessels; AP-3C Orion aircraft and, when required, one Major Fleet Unit that is available to support maritime patrol operations as well as security elements which are normally about 100 people.

In addition, Navy is currently manning two additional Cape Class Patrol Boats on loan from Australian Border Force. Navy assumed operation of Cape Byron in July and Cape Nelson earlier this month. The Armidale fleet achieved 91 per cent availability for tasking over the past financial year and the temporary transfer of those two Cape Class will allow deep maintenance on two ships concurrently over the next 18 months. Both Cape Class vessels are expected to return to Border Force at the end of next year.

The ADF contribution to border protection operations is complemented by a number of periodic maritime surveillance operations conducted in association with our regional neighbours to promote and maintain regional stability. This is achieved primarily through Operation GATEWAY in South East Asia and Operation

SOLANIA in support of the Pacific Island nations in the region, as well as coordinated patrols with Indonesia and maritime deployments in the region. The ADF also stands ready to assist with short notice deployments on Humanitarian and Disaster Relief operations both regionally and domestically.

In that sense, the recent Sea Series of exercises off North Queensland were planned to ensure the Amphibious Ready Element is certified and ready for the upcoming disaster season. This year our response capability includes HMAS Choules and, for the first time, HMAS Canberra which is fully manned and certified and now stands ready to assist should the need arise.

In summary Senators, on any given day, we have approximately 2,500 Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on operations here in Australia and around the world. Our people are held in high regard and when I meet with our friends and allies, they are quick to compliment the outstanding talent and skill of the women and men who serve in the ADF as well as their genuine desire to help. That others recognise what I already know makes me very proud to command the ADF.