

Chief of the Defence Force

Additional Estimates Opening Statement

23 February 2011

Introduction

Good Morning Chair and members of the Committee—thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement this morning.

Operations

I will begin with operations, for my customary update.

Response to the New Zealand Earthquake

Following the devastating earthquake in New Zealand yesterday, overnight, two of our C-130's provided strategic air lift of New South Wales Emergency Services urban search and rescue personnel, along with 20 tonnes of equipment, from RAAF Base Richmond to Christchurch.

It is anticipated that a C-17 will also depart from RAAF Base Amberley this morning, carrying Queensland-based search and rescue personnel and another 20 tonnes of cargo.

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CDF, ACM Angus Houston, Defence
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Of course, the ADF will remain responsive to any tasking it receives from the Australian Government, in response to requests from the Government of New Zealand.

Flood and Cyclone response

Over the past two months the ADF has supported a number of response and recovery operations in Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory following a series of natural disasters.

This was the largest ADF response to a civil emergency to date.

All told, we were able to deploy the equivalent of an entire joint brigade group of about 3,500 people on two operations, as well as other Defence Assistance to the Civil Community tasks, at short notice and during a period where our people are normally stood-down for the Christmas/New Year period to spend time with their families.

Enabling our assistance was helicopter and fixed-wing support air craft—including Blackhawk, Kiowa, Sea Hawk, Sea King and Augusta A109 helicopters, and C-17, C-130 and King Air aircraft—amphibious, mine clearance and hydrographic vessels—including HMA Ships *Benalla*, *Brunei*, *Huon*, *Labuan*, *Melville*, *Mermaid*, *Leeuwin*, *Paluma*, *Shepparton*, *Tarakan*, and *Wewak*, 4 Lighter Amphibious Resupply Cargo vessels and 3

landing crafts—as well as bushmasters, Mack trucks and engineer plant equipment such as bulldozers and excavators.

Our people undertook a range of diverse tasks.

They went door-to-door to deliver warnings and advice; built sandbag levies; evacuated residents; conducted aerial reconnaissance; assisted with clean-up; re-built critical infrastructure; cleared roads; delivered emergency food, water and other cargo such as laptops, mattresses, tents and stretchers; surveyed waterways; re-directed creeks; conducted damage assessments; and assisted with search and rescue operations.

With little warning the ADF was able to ready and then deploy a substantial force, which we then sustained for the best part of six weeks—indeed some elements continue to support communities in need.

All of this was achieved concurrently with the 3300 ADF men and women we have deployed to 12 operating locations around the world, and emphasises the importance of ensuring we have assets available for unforeseeable requirements to support domestic security and emergency response tasks.

Our response meant that at one point we had about 6,500 people on operations—and of course, this does not include the substantial amount of Defence people who work in an enabling and support function here in Canberra and at other major bases around the country in the disaster areas, particularly at Amberley, Enoggera, Townsville and Cairns.

I am extremely proud of how quickly we were able to respond and what our people—some of whom were themselves affected by these disasters—were able to achieve.

Their actions, conduct and professionalism have rightly earned them much admiration from their fellow Australians, especially those who benefited from their immediate and compassionate support.

As always, we stand ready to provide further assistance that may be required of us—just as we have in responding to the New Zealand earthquake overnight.

Afghanistan

Turning now to Afghanistan, in late January I attended the NATO Military Committee Chiefs of Defence Meeting in Brussels.

I would characterise the mood amongst military leaders as cautiously optimistic.

Progress in counter-insurgency is always gradual, but 2010 was clearly a positive year for the Coalition.

As you are aware, ISAF has a fully integrated counter-insurgency strategy, which has now been in place for over a year.

Progress made in 2010 has shown our strategy is sound, ISAF's long-term commitment is solid and with our Afghan partners we will succeed.

Over the past year we have seen promising military gains with ISAF's focus on conducting shape-clear-hold-build operations in Helmand and Kandahar Provinces paying dividends.

The challenge now is to consolidate the gains that have been made, maintain our momentum, and make these gains irreversible.

Thus, a major operation will begin this year, named Operation OMID 1390, to build on these successes.

Australia will contribute to this operation through our ongoing involvement in Uruzgan Province.

In terms of ADF progress since I last briefed the Committee, our Mentoring Task Force has expanded their partnered mentoring program and continues to live and work closely with the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade in its Forward Operating Bases.

We have seen solid progress in the 4th Brigade capabilities.

In November last year, the MTF conducted several mentored patrols with its Afghan partners aimed at disrupting insurgent activities, locating and destroying weapons and IED caches, and providing a more secure Uruzgan region.

In January, we conducted a series of Afghan-led operations in the Mirabad Valley which culminated in the establishment of a new fortified local compound in Sorkh Lez to extend Afghan Government influence.

Additionally, our Special Forces continue to make a highly valued contribution to the broader ISAF campaign across the South, targeting and disrupting key insurgent networks in Uruzgan and neighbouring provinces in support of ISAF operations.

A recent significant disruption operation was undertaken in Northern Uruzgan in December and January where Afghan National Police officers, supported by Australian Special Forces, detained an individual believed to be a leading bomb-maker and a close associate of the top insurgent commander in Uruzgan.

More broadly, the international community is now focusing its efforts on achieving the key task of transitioning security responsibility for parts of Afghanistan to the Afghans themselves.

At the Lisbon Summit in November last year, ISAF partners endorsed President Karzai's goal of an 'irreversible transition to full Afghan security responsibility and leadership in all provinces by the end of 2014.'

This will commence in some parts of Afghanistan in 2011, with the goal that Afghan forces lead and conduct security operations in all provinces by the end of 2014.

But as leaders made clear in Lisbon, transition does not equate to a withdrawal of forces.

Australia is committed to supporting this process.

In summary, 2011 will be pivotal in Afghanistan.

The momentum is shifting our way—but we need to remain mindful that though progress has been made, it remains fragile and reversible.

The insurgency will seek to regain the lost initiative, and we can expect violence to continue.

A lot now depends on our Afghan partners—but we have seen them step up to the challenge.

Afghan National Security Forces are continuing to show both quantitative and qualitative improvements throughout Afghanistan, including Uruzgan, and we are seeing an increase in their confidence and professionalism.

Death of Corporal Atkinson and Sapper Larcombe

Sadly, I end my remarks on Afghanistan by offering my condolences to the families of Corporal Richard Atkinson and Sapper Jamie Larcombe.

Corporal Richard Atkinson, from the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment, was killed in Uruzgan on the 2nd of February by an Improvised Explosive Device as he led his combat engineer section as a search commander.

To his fiancée, Dannielle, and his parents Ross and Kate, I offer my deepest sympathy on their loss.

Sapper Jamie Larcombe, also from the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment, was killed just this week during an engagement with insurgents.

I offer his partner Rhiannon and his parents Steven and Tricia my sincere condolences.

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I thought it necessary this morning to update the Committee on progress with the decision of the Director of Military Prosecution to prosecute three members of the ADF in relation to a civilian casualty incident on the 12th of February 2009.

Previously, I indicated that two members had been served with their charges on the 27th of September 2010.

I can confirm today that the third member was served with his charges on the 26th of November 2010.

Since then, the DMP has referred the charges against the three members to the Registrar of Military Justice—two members on the 14th of January, and the third member on the 16th of February—and requested a trial by a service tribunal in the form of a court martial.

The Registrar of Military Justice is currently working through this case management process, independent of the Australian Defence Force chain of command.

The central outcome of this process will be the issuing of a convening order, which will formalise the Court Martial proceedings, including the appointment of the Judge Advocate, the President and members of the court martial panel, and the date and location of the trials.

Regardless of the outcome of the pending trial proceedings, I remain concerned about the welfare of all ADF members who are associated with this matter.

I am determined to ensure that every step is taken to provide them with a fair trial and to look after their welfare.

HMAS *Success* COI

In terms of the HMAS *Success* Commission of Inquiry, yesterday in Parliament the Minister tabled a copy of the first part of the report entitled 'The Asian Deployment and immediate aftermath'.

Immediately following this tabling, the Chief and Navy and I conducted a media conference and earlier yesterday we briefed some members of this Committee on the report and our intended response.

Senators, as we expressed yesterday, the Chief of Navy and I are bitterly disappointed with the behaviour of a number of individuals, as well as the serious problems that have been raised regarding leadership, culture, alcohol misuse and behaviour ashore.

I have fully accepted the findings, recommendations and conclusions of Part One of the report.

I have established a specialist HMAS *Success* implementation team headed by Rear Admiral Allan Du Toit, and I have directed him to report regularly to me on progress.

I will accept nothing less than a fully resourced, fully supported and energised approach to implementing the recommendations of this report.

You will note that a key element of the solution is the cultural renewal program being implemented by the Chief of Navy—New Generation Navy.

The Chief of Navy would be delighted to outline this program further for the members of the Committee should you wish during questioning.

Another key aspect of our response will be the ADF Alcohol Management Strategy.

In partnership with the Australian Drug Foundation, we are aiming to define and understand current alcohol-related issues and then create sustainable change in alcohol attitudes, behaviours and culture across the ADF.

This will be a long-term cultural change strategy to prevent the misuse of alcohol.

Commander Joint Health is available today should you wish to discuss this strategy in more detail.

Senators, the behaviour detailed in this report is not the conduct we expect of the men and women in the Royal Australian Navy.

But nor should it tarnish the reputation of the Navy more broadly or the entire ship's company of HMAS *Success*.

The vast majority of our Naval officers and sailors are dedicated, professional and serve our nation with distinction—as evidenced by the response of HMAS *Pirie* to the tragic arrival of SIEV 221 at Christmas Island in December.

They follow the example set by the Chief of Navy in this regard, who has my total support.

Amphibious Capability

Another issue on which I fully supported the approach of the Chief of Navy was his decision late last year to place both HMA Ships *Kanimbla* and *Manoora* in operational pause.

He did so, on the advice of the Seaworthiness Board, which is an independent capability and quality assurance audit initiative commissioned by the Chief of Navy on 17 June 2010.

That Board provided Chief of Navy with an objective ‘health check’ on the material condition of the vessels.

They have been in service with the RAN since the late 1990s after originally being commissioned in the US Navy in 1971 and have been working extremely hard.

I fully support the decisive intervention of the Chief of Navy, who demonstrated courage and sound judgement in putting the safety of his people and the seaworthiness of his amphibious ships ahead of other imperatives.

Subsequent examination found that the cost of repairs to HMAS *Manoora* and the time they would take, balanced against the remainder of her service life, meant that the most appropriate course of action was to decommission the ship this year.

In terms of HMAS *Kanimbla*, the known repairs that were required were not as extensive, plus there was further opportunity for return on investment out to 2014—so it was decided to keep her in operational pause and progress with repairs.

It is currently anticipated that remediation will be completed no earlier than the end of this year and the ship will be available for operation mid-2012.

Unfortunately, this means that Navy's amphibious capability is now limited, with the first of our two Amphibious assault ships not due to come on-line until 2014.

To mitigate this, HMAS *Tobruk*, our Landing Ship Heavy, is being carefully managed to ensure heavy sealift preparedness requirements can be met.

Additionally, there are several alternatives for maintaining our amphibious capability that are currently under consideration.

Obviously, this situation is not ideal, and the Secretary and I provided advice to the Minister on the 9th of February outlining the many causes of this situation, and we—and the Chief of Navy—share his disappointment at the unavailability of HMA Ships *Kanimbla* and *Manoora*.

We look forward to supporting the independent team of experts, led by Mr Paul Rizzo, appointed by the Minister to develop a plan to address the causes of the problems facing the availability of the amphibious and support ships.

I want to now address the state of the Fleet more broadly, and begin by highlighting that Navy has met all operational obligations during the last 12 months.

To do so, I stress that the Navy does not need to keep all of its fleet at a maximum state of readiness all the time.

In very broad terms, about a third of the fleet is kept on a high level of readiness; another third is kept on a lower level of readiness for training and exercises; and a third is undergoing scheduled and unscheduled maintenance and upgrades.

This is a deliberate planning approach and the only way in which we can sustainably generate the capability we require to meet our operational and contingency commitments within allocated funding.

As has been made clear to all Governments, higher levels of preparedness require higher levels of sustainment funding.

Navy maintains a high level of activity.

For example, last week Navy had 27 ships—or about 50% of the Fleet—at sea at some point during that seven day period, conducting operations, preparing for operations or undertaking training.

This included 7 Frigates; 1 Submarine; 11 Armidale Patrol Boats; 3 Mine Hunters; 1 Oiler, and 4 Hydrographic ships.

In terms of personnel, we have been open in reporting that Navy has some skilled workforce pressures as a result of a period of low recruitment and high separation.

In recent times, this trend has reversed and the Chief of Navy has focused on the training of his workforce and has succeeded in growing it by around 500 people over the past 12 months.

In addition, Navy has qualified the largest number of submariners in the last 12 months than in any previous year.

As you would recall, little more than two years ago, that workforce was at its lowest point.

Having made it one of highest priorities, the Chief of Navy has personally driven the recovery of Australia's submarine workforce in that short period of time.

Finally, I would like to commend to you the leadership of RADM Crane in a very challenging time for the Navy.

In my view, he has initiated much-needed cultural change and capability management reform in Navy, which will endure for many years to come.

Indeed, his enlightened approach will not only remedy present problems, but will also ensure a safe and effective transition to the Navy of the future.

Conclusion

Senators—thank you for your patience this morning in affording me the opportunity to make this detailed and comprehensive opening statement.

I now welcome your questions.

--ends—

2770 words = 25 minutes