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Senate Committee Report

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

Bali 2002 - Security threats to Australians in South East Asia

Government Response

General Response to the Report:

The increased threat of global terrorism since 11 September 2001 has changed the international security environment for all Australians. Given this environment, the Government continues to attach the highest priority to the provision of accurate and properly assessed travel advice about potential safety and security-related risks. Travel advice enables the millions of Australians who journey overseas each year to make their own informed decisions about travel. It is incumbent upon Government to ensure that the advice remains credible in the public mind and is not blunted by a perception that risk is being overstated. To this end, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), together with the Australian Intelligence Community, will continue to review the way in which assessed threats are presented and disseminated to the Australian traveller. Elements of the report prepared by the Senate Committee inquiry into security threats to Australians in South East Asia will prove a useful reference point in assisting in this process.

The Government notes the Committee's conclusion that 'there was no clear warning in the form of specific intelligence which, if identified and acted upon, would have provided an opportunity to prevent the Bali bombings or to act to protect those there at the time'. The Government also endorses the Committee's finding that the Bali disaster was not 'a result of some culpable lapse by Australian Government agencies or individual officials'.

The Government also welcomes the finding that 'anyone reading the travel advice, even just the headline summary ... would understand that there was a generic terrorist risk, that bombs had exploded in the past, including where tourists gathered, and that further explosions may be attempted'.

As the Committee notes, none of the statements by the Government in the month leading up to the attacks reflected information about Bali or any prior knowledge of a terrorist attack on bars or nightclubs. If the Government had had such information, it would have acted to prevent the attacks.

It is important to note that the Committee has put to rest claims that relevant information had been made available to the Government, or that threat advice was ignored. As the Committee says, "these reports and allegations were either simply erroneous or lacked foundation, or were highly contestable opinions".

While the Committee comments that the specific reference to Bali may have inadvertently reinforced what it describes as a prevailing, erroneous view that Bali was a safe haven, it also acknowledges the clarity of hindsight in coming to this judgment.

The Government reiterates that the factual statement in the travel advice that "tourist services are operating normally elsewhere in Indonesia, including in Bali" was included as a response to a very common question asked by Australian travellers when they saw that civil unrest and violent demonstrations were taking place in other parts of Indonesia. It was not intended to detract from the first sentence of the travel advice highlighting the risk of terrorism throughout Indonesia.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that, with a view to ensuring the country's future arrangements between intelligence assessments, threat assessments and travel advisories are optimal, consideration should be given to the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry with specific terms of reference to address these and related matters.

The Government does not support the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry to consider the relationship between intelligence assessments, threat assessments and travel advisories. The Committee's report has already acknowledged that 'in its travel advisories DFAT employed the relevant level of warning and language that corresponded to the threat being conveyed by the intelligence agencies' at the time of the Bali bombings.

Government Senators on the Committee have already noted that they could not fathom how, 'given the extensive evidence canvassed in the Report', it could be asserted that the travel advice (at the time of the bombings) could be considered inadequate.

A further commission of inquiry would either duplicate work already done or replicate the functions of existing Senate processes. Questions about intelligence before the Bali bombings were addressed in the Blick Inquiry and questions concerning the travel advice have been thoroughly reviewed by the Senate inquiry.

As the Committee acknowledges, the Government has worked, since Bali, to strengthen even further its arrangements for the production and dissemination of travel advice. Shortly after the Bali bombings, at Mr Downer's initiative, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) took steps to strengthen its consultative arrangements with ASIO, which produces threat assessments, to provide additional assurance that intelligence information is fully integrated into our public advice.

Flowing from this initiative, the arrangements that now exist between DFAT and ASIO for the declassification of intelligence material for use in the preparation of travel advice are well integrated. A number of substantial enhancements have been put in place, including:

- . a 24-hour National Threat Assessment Centre (NTAC) has been established, providing rapid threat assessments on all intelligence received by Australian agencies
- . where ASIO's threat level is at high, DFAT's advice will, at a minimum, recommend that Australians exercise a high degree of caution. NTAC sees and comments on all travel advice drafts where the threat assessment level is at high
- . representatives from all members of the Australian intelligence community as well as the AFP, PM&C and DFAT meet weekly as the Terrorism Threat Coordination Group (TTCG). Chaired by the head of NTAC, and involving other agencies, such as the Department of Transport and Regional Services, as required, the TTCG considers emerging threats and assists in coordinating the intelligence response to those threats
- . communications arrangements between DFAT and NTAC allow for immediate notification of emerging threats to ensure that travel advice can be amended whenever required, regardless of the time or day.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the government, in consultation with the travel industry further develop and oversee a code of practice which would, among other things, make it mandatory for travel agents/advisers to provide to overseas travellers, at the time a booking is made, a copy of both DFAT's Travel Advice for the destination concerned and ASIO's threat assessment for the country itself. Travellers must be advised to consult the DFAT Travel Advice 24 hours prior to their departure.

The Government acknowledges the importance of ensuring that travel advice is widely disseminated to Australian travellers. The Government does not, however, support mandatory obligations on travel agents nor can the Government agree to the public release of classified ASIO threat assessments. These threat assessments are already fully reflected in the travel advice, which constitutes an unclassified report on security-related threats in overseas destinations.

As part of the Government's efforts to encourage industry promotion of travel advisories, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) launched the Charter for Safe Travel on 11 June 2003. The Charter meets the objectives intended in the Committee's recommendation without the cost and increased resources required by a legislative approach and mandatory obligations. Market survey work conducted as part of the *smartraveller* campaign shows that

approximately 90 per cent of travel agents already claim to encourage their customers to access government travel advisories.

Under the voluntary Charter, travel agents recognise their shared commitment with the Government to assist Australians overseas to travel safely. While it is the responsibility of the individual traveller to prepare adequately for overseas travel, travel agents who join the Charter recognise the invaluable part they can play to assist this preparation. As part of their service to their clients and to the Australian public, they commit to:

- . provide travellers with consular travel advice
- . encourage travellers to take out adequate travel insurance
- . inform travellers of the preparations they need to make before travelling
- . work together in partnership with Government and other travel professionals to promote safe travel.

The Charter currently has more than 1,600 members and the Government remains focused on heightening the Charter profile and increasing its membership. In July 2003, the Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) made partnership with the Charter a requirement of AFTA accreditation, which will see all members of AFTA (currently 2,223) joining the Charter by the end of 2005. The Government has made it a priority to work closely with AFTA in order to spread awareness of travel advisories and safe travel messages. This includes regular editorial contributions to the AFTA Traveller magazine and active participation in the AFTA General Conference.

Since the launch of *smartraveller*, DFAT officers have participated in sixteen holiday and travel expos in capital cities across Australia to work with industry to promote travel advisories. DFAT staff have also provided training to a large number of travel agents in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as 100 branch managers from the Student Travel Association (STA), about travel advice.

In May 2004 the Government established the *smartraveller* Consultative Group, comprising DFAT and travel industry representatives, to provide a forum for advancing the aims of the Charter, enable the travel industry to offer suggestions on improving the presentation, format and clarity of travel advice, and strengthen the reach of key *smartraveller* messages.

Of course, the Government does not rely solely on the travel industry to disseminate travel advice. Through the \$9.7 million *smartraveller* campaign, travel advice is brought to the public's attention through print media, television, and the internet. The travel advice is available through the internet, an automated telephone service and via *smartraveller* kiosks located at Australian international airports and passport offices. Market survey work indicates that 70 per cent of Australians intend to consult the Government's advice prior to travel. The Government now receives on average 160,000 hits a week on the *smartraveller* website and 46,000 Australians are enrolled to receive travel advice updates by email subscription.

Travel advice is kept current and, where the situation at a destination is fluid, frequently updated. While viewing the travel advice 24 hours before departure is a useful measure, Australian travellers are encouraged to subscribe to the travel advice on the internet and to register their presence overseas through the on-line registration process. In this way, significant changes to travel advice can be brought to the attention of Australian travellers.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that DFAT subject a representative selection of its Travel Advice to examination by an independent assessor with qualifications and experience in linguistics, literacy and communication. The assessor shall report to the minister on the intelligibility and accessibility of the language in which information is conveyed in travel advisories.

The Government recognises the importance of using plain language and a readily comprehensible system of grading of risk in different locations in its travel advice. DFAT routinely reviews the presentation, format and general approach to travel advice on a regular basis, particularly given the Government's concern to ensure that the advice remains credible in the public mind. In response to feedback from the

travelling public and the travel industry, DFAT is implementing a range of changes to travel advisories. In particular, the travel advice is being made clearer through the introduction of new sub-headings to differentiate safety and security threats, putting them in plain English and introducing other textual changes. For lower risk countries, DFAT is adjusting language to make it clearer that the behaviour being recommended equates to that which is practised in Australia.

This is an ongoing process of reform which will include in its next phase consultation with linguistics and communication experts with a view to improving the intelligibility and accessibility of travel advice language.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that

- *the Commonwealth government prepare a green paper on the establishment of a national compensation scheme for victims of terrorism related crimes that fall within the Commonwealth jurisdiction; and*
- *the national council of Attorneys-General develop a proposal for the harmonisation of state laws dealing with compensation for victims of crimes so as to provide for circumstances such as terrorist attack.*

The Government does not support this recommendation. The Government has concluded that financial and other assistance should continue to be considered on a case by case basis, focusing on specific needs, such as that which has been provided by the Government to date for the survivors of the Bali tragedy.

The Government is sympathetic to the suffering of the Bali victims and their families and provides a wide range of ongoing assistance to meet the health care and other needs of those affected by the Bali tragedy rather than a general lump sum assistance scheme. The Government was responsive to the immediate needs of victims and families and provided substantial assistance, including with the cost of airfares and accommodation for people travelling to Bali as a result of the attack or who needed to travel within Australia to provide support to loved ones in hospital as well as assisting with the cost of funerals. In addition, the Government donated \$1 million to the Australian Red Cross Bali Appeal, which was launched in October 2002 to assist

Australians directly affected by the Bali bombings and, through the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI), to assist the Balinese people in their disaster recovery and preparedness.

The government has also provided a range of other financial assistance and ongoing support to those affected including meeting medical and other costs associated with injuries that are not otherwise covered by Medicare and private health insurance, such as for counselling and rehabilitation, and assisting with the costs of travel and accommodation and providing support to those attending the first anniversary commemorations in Bali and Canberra. The government will continue to monitor the needs of those affected by the tragedy and to provide ongoing assistance, such as emergency financial assistance and personal support, to those affected through a network of family liaison officers.