

Chapter 6

Response team and interagency coordination

6.1 The government is confronted with two major considerations when it first learns that an Australian has been taken captive overseas—mobilising its resources to effect the safe and expeditious release of the captive and assisting the family and friends of the kidnapped victim.

6.2 In this chapter, the committee looks at the government's immediate response to reports of an Australian kidnapped overseas and its subsequent actions to secure the victim's release. In the following chapter, the committee considers the manner in which departments liaise with, and support, family members during the captive's detention.

Consular Response Group (1996)

6.3 In cases of kidnapping abroad, Australia's no-ransom approach limits its options. Even so, DFAT informed the committee that it has 'clear and established procedures' that govern its response to any incident involving the kidnapping of an Australian overseas.¹

6.4 In May 1996, DFAT established the Consular Response Group (CRG) to manage major or complicated consular cases that 'entail particular difficulties for the department', including hostage cases.² At the time, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Alexander Downer, described this initiative as 'giving a powerful boost' to the government's ability to handle sensitive and complex situations.³ The group comprised three officers at differing levels, 'combining skills for varying backgrounds'.⁴ Soon after it was established, the group had a key role in negotiations when an Australian pilot was detained in Somalia for four months by militia forces.⁵ On his release in October 1996, the minister praised the group for performing

1 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 2].

2 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Helping Australians abroad: a review of the Australian Government's consular services*, June 1997, p. 177.

3 A Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Government Response to Senate Consular Services Report', media release, FA144, 26, November 1997, accessed 3 November 2011, http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/1997/fa144_97.html

4 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Helping Australians abroad: a review of the Australian Government's consular services*, June 1997, p. 177.

5 United Nations Development Programme, Horn of Africa, *The Monthly Review*, 24 September–31 October 1996, accessed 1 November 2011, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/eue_web/hoa1096.htm

'admirably in exactly the role for which it was created'. In this case an officer from within the department travelled to Nairobi to work directly on the case.⁶

6.5 In its 1997 report on consular services, the committee recognised that the only feasible and appropriate way to handle a crisis such as a kidnapping was through 'a specialist unit'. It commended DFAT for establishing the CRG but recommended that the department ensure that the group was adequately resourced and that the optimal level of expertise was maintained within it at all times.⁷

6.6 Although no longer named the Consular Response Group, DFAT has people in the department ready to respond to an overseas incident such as the kidnapping of an Australian citizen. For example, in the case of Mr Wood, the department dispatched promptly a sizable task force of senior level personnel to Baghdad, led by a Deputy Secretary, Mr Nick Warner.⁸ At that time, Australia's diplomatic and military presence in that country was already high due to the Iraq war, which made this particular response possible.

6.7 It should be noted, however, that the government's ability to dispatch a team to another country in response to a kidnapping is severely constrained by a number of factors. Kidnappings may occur in a remote and lawless region of a country with which Australia has no diplomatic ties. Even where friendly relations exist between the two countries, Australia must respect the other's sovereignty. In such cases, Australia may offer to assist in resolving the hostage situation, usually through the offices of its Embassy or High Commission. But that decision and the extent to which the country would accept Australia's involvement rests with the local authorities. In other incidents, the Australian victim may be part of a larger hostage group requiring complex negotiations and liaison with the respective governments. The cases of kidnappings cited in chapter 2 demonstrate the limitations placed on Australia's ability to send a response team into the country where an Australian may be held captive or indeed the wisdom in doing so. These considerations are taken into account when an emergency response team meets to determine the best means of securing the safe return of the victim.

Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force

6.8 DFAT informed the committee that it undertakes contingency planning across all aspects of consular operations, which takes account of the government's preparedness to deal with major international incidents and crises overseas such as the kidnapping of an Australian citizen. According to DFAT, its contingency planning

6 A Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Justin Fraser Release', media release, FA106, 4 October 1996, accessed 3 November 2011, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/1996/fa106.html>

7 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Helping Australians abroad: a review of the Australian Government's consular services*, June 1997, p. 179.

8 M Wood, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

includes information gathering and analysis; desktop and scenario exercises; liaison with other Australian government agencies; and consultations with partner governments and governments in high-risk locations. DFAT participates in the contingency planning exercises of other countries.⁹ The committee now looks in greater detail at the government's response to a kidnapping incident overseas.

6.9 Despite the differences and specific circumstances of each kidnapping, DFAT informed the committee that 'there are core principles that can be applied' in determining its response to any kidnapping situation and these protocols reflect DFAT's experience.¹⁰ Ms Bird informed the committee that first and foremost, the government would do everything it could within the bounds of the no-ransom policy to help secure the release of any Australian kidnap victim.¹¹ For example, DFAT explained that some incidents of kidnapping require a more comprehensive response that draws on the expertise of a range of government agencies.¹² In such cases, a number of key government departments or agencies swing into action when an Australian citizen is kidnapped overseas, including DFAT; the Attorney-General's Department; intelligence agencies, such as ASIO; the AFP; and Defence.¹³ The extent of their involvement depends on the nature and circumstances of the kidnapping.

6.10 DFAT leads the whole-of-government response through an Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF) which assumes a coordinating role across government covering all relevant government agencies.¹⁴ This response draws on every available source of information and assistance to contribute to resolving the kidnapping and to support the kidnap victim and their families.¹⁵ Once alerted to an incident, the task force will proceed straightaway to examine the issues.¹⁶ DFAT explained:

As a first step, DFAT will activate and chair an Inter-Departmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF). This is supported by a dedicated unit within the Consular, Public Diplomacy and Parliamentary Affairs Division. Membership of the IDETF will be broad, including not only core agencies with specific expertise and information but all agencies that can contribute to an effective whole-of-government response. This is an important element

9 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 8].

10 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

11 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 30.

12 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

13 Defence recognised that the complex situations in which a kidnapping occur require 'a coordinated, multiagency response by the Australian Government'. Department of Defence, *Submission 15*, [p. 1].

14 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3] and *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 30.

15 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

16 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 24.

in ensuring that every possible lead, suggestion or offer of assistance or information is fully explored.¹⁷

6.11 As an example of the expertise provided by specific agencies, Ms Bird cited the AFP which handles hostage negotiations—DFAT do not get involved in the actual conduct of the negotiations, the details and how that is done.¹⁸ The AFP explained that its response to an incident would be in support of the IDETF and typically 'comprise investigative, negotiator and intelligence capability'. It would also work to achieve full cooperation, on a police-to-police basis, with any relevant foreign law enforcement agency.¹⁹ Assistant Commissioner Ramzi Jabbour explained that the AFP's role is normally one of working through its international network:

...to liaise and provide support, if appropriate, to local law enforcement authorities in that regard. We could also potentially provide intelligence to them from the families and other next of kin to be able to assist in the negotiation process.²⁰

6.12 Australia's intelligence community would also become involved. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) highlighted the importance of indentifying a lead intelligence agency at the earliest stages of a kidnapping to support the work of DFAT and the AFP. It explained:

A lead agency fulfils the important role of driving and coordinating the whole-of-intelligence community effort, as well as providing a single point of contact on intelligence issues for DFAT and the AFP.²¹

6.13 ASIO recognised the necessity to determine the lead agency on a case-by-case basis, taking account of the circumstances of the kidnapping and responsibilities of the various Australian Intelligence Community (AIC) agencies:

It would be appropriate, for example, for ASIO to act as lead agency when a kidnapping involves individuals or groups engaged in activities relevant to security. Absent a link to security issues for which ASIO has mandate—for example in the case of a criminally-inspired kidnapping—the lead intelligence agency role would fall to another AIC agency.²²

6.14 The Attorney-General's Department noted that on being informed about the kidnapping of an Australian overseas, its Office of International Law would not wait to be asked to get involved but would immediately commence looking at the issues. Mr Geoffrey McDonald, First Assistant Secretary, National Law and Policy Division,

17 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

18 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, pp. 30, 32.

19 Australian Federal Police, *Submission 10*, [p. 1].

20 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 15.

21 Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), *Submission 6*, [p. 2].

22 Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), *Submission 6*, [p. 2].

Attorney-General's Department, explained that the advice his department could offer in the first 24 hours could be provided very quickly:

...if that happened [need for advice on a kidnapping], the phone would be ringing at six o'clock in the morning or something like that. We can provide advice quickly about what the scope of the law is, but to apply it to a particular circumstance depends a lot on the facts, which are not clear.²³

6.15 In some cases ADF capabilities may be called on to assist in resolving an overseas kidnapping (see paragraphs 4.28–4.32).

Government-to-government assistance and links with non-government organisations

6.16 In the international context, DFAT indicated that it would cooperate with the government of the country in which the kidnapping happened:

...to ensure all appropriate action to resolve the situation is pursued actively, while maintaining the safety interests of the Australian who is kidnapped. This generally involves significant representations and liaison at various levels of government.²⁴

6.17 In addition and where appropriate, DFAT would work closely with colleagues from other governments, including but not limited to Australia's key consular partners: New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.²⁵ DFAT Acting First Assistant Secretary, Consular, Public Diplomacy and Parliamentary Affairs Division, Mr Jon Philp, stated as an example:

I should also point out that the Canadians do, unfortunately, have a great deal more experience than us on these sorts of issues and they will closely engage with us and we listen very carefully to what they have to say.²⁶

6.18 DFAT would also liaise with other foreign services that may have 'detailed on-the-ground knowledge or influence' and directly or indirectly, draw on the assistance of Australian and international non-government organisations that may have particular skills or expertise in the relevant location'.²⁷ According to DFAT this liaison and cooperation with countries:

...can be invaluable in providing access to additional information or insights, including into the circumstances of the location concerned and the group or organisation responsible for the kidnapping or adding pressure or

23 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 26.

24 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

25 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 3].

26 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

27 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 30 and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [pp. 2–4].

influence on the kidnappers. Other countries may also have direct experience of kidnappings in the same region.²⁸

6.19 According to DFAT, in some cases, it may work with local intermediaries, able to provide further information or insights, or bring influence to bear.²⁹ As part of this action, the department would make use of intelligence networks. Overall, DFAT would seek information from 'any avenue possible to support a comprehensive, whole-of-government response'.³⁰

6.20 The success of the task force depends, by and large, on the extent to which the respective agencies work in unison toward the protection and safe release of the hostage and the assistance they can elicit from overseas countries and organisations well placed to assist in achieving this objective. The experience, expertise and preparedness of the members of the team will also determine the effectiveness of their performance.

Family views on the response

6.21 The experiences of the Brennan family and to a lesser extent the Wood family do not match the description provided by the government agencies which contemplates a prompt, focused and well coordinated response to kidnappings. According to Dr Wood, the foreign affairs officials generally were savvy. He felt that they were 'very alive to the implications of a kidnapped citizen and the kinds of demands that would be placed on the family'.³¹ Overall, he described the contingency planning for the crisis and the speedy actions of the task force as 'impressive'.³² Dr Wood indicated that although DFAT did not have a role in securing his brother's release, it managed to 'keep the lines of communication open' and possibly delayed what might have been an execution.³³ He stated:

From the first traumatic day, I felt very strongly that there was a structure. It was impressive that Nick Warner, with a team—I knew it included police and I took that it included intelligence—flew off that very day. They were prepared for a contingency such as happened. They had no foreknowledge of who exactly would be involved. But they were prepared for such a contingency. That was impressive. Such a response may have applied, I guess, only to someone kidnapped in Iraq, of all places.³⁴

28 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

29 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

30 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

31 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 2.

32 M Wood, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

33 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 5.

34 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 5.

6.22 Dr Wood was critical of the AFP, however, whose role within government was to advise the family on negotiation strategies. In his view, the AFP officers did not seem to have the same degree of savvy as DFAT: the officers' 'expertise in negotiation strategies was limited'.³⁵ He stated that the recording equipment installed in his and his brother's home to record all phone conversations appeared 'antiquated':

My wife and I had a recording device put into our home within days of the crisis outset, which was adequate; it recorded phone conversation, incoming and my own voice or my wife's voice, so there was that sort of very technical somewhat clunky assistance.³⁶

6.23 He also suggested that the AFP's briefing of the family, and him, in particular, was not particularly sophisticated:

Officers provided briefing of a standard nature on what to note and say in the event of a call. Higher-level officers, of the Counter-Terrorism Unit, briefed me on negotiation strategies. Apart from the proof-of-life question, the strategies seemed basic. Our impression was that the officers' expertise in negotiation strategies was limited.³⁷

6.24 An interagency team was also formed during the early days of Mr Brennan's kidnapping which included DFAT, the AFP and the Queensland Police.³⁸ According to Mr Brennan:

Four special operational units were set up to support what became known as 'Operation Mane'. Three were established in Australia, one at my family home in Moore Park, one in Brisbane and the other in Canberra. The fourth was based in Nairobi, Kenya to more readily facilitate direct negotiations with the kidnappers in neighbouring Somalia.³⁹

6.25 Mr Brennan noted that no government agency explained to him or his family which departments or agencies, aside from DFAT and the AFP, were involved in the operation, how they interacted and coordinated their activities, their role, functions and strategies.⁴⁰ Mrs Bonney indicated that after some initial confusion, the family was informed that although Nigel's kidnapping was a matter under DFAT's jurisdiction, the AFP would be the lead investigative agency.⁴¹ She noted further that the AFP were 'unable to mobilize rapidly enough' so the Queensland Police were called on to assist.⁴²

35 M Wood, *Submission 3*, p. 3.

36 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 2.

37 M Wood, *Submission 3*, p. 3 and also *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 3.

38 N Brennan, *Submission 12*, [p. 5].

39 N Brennan, *Submission 12*, [p. 5].

40 N Brennan, *Submission 12*, [pp. 5–6].

41 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 8].

42 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 2].

6.26 Based on his and his family's experience, Mr Brennan suggested that the government departments 'did not work together at all'.⁴³ He noted that the Queensland Police Service were there from the start but that one of their best negotiators was tasked out in the first week because of jurisdictional issues.⁴⁴ Mr Brennan explained:

He was someone that had bonded with the family as well. He was teaching my sister, Nicole, how to basically negotiate with the kidnapers. My family loved the idea of community policing, and then this government department was thrown into the house and those guys were basically told to leave without even saying goodbye to my family. And it was only the Queensland police guys that actually pulled my family aside and said, 'We have been told that we have got to go'.⁴⁵

6.27 Furthermore, the various government agencies were providing conflicting information to the Brennan family indicating a breakdown in communication between them. As an example, Mr Brennan informed the committee that DFAT made clear that it would not pay a ransom or facilitate a ransom while, at the same time, the AFP was asking his family 'its net worth and was telling them to liquidate assets to pay a ransom'.⁴⁶ Indeed, Nicole Bonney told the committee that on day 7 of her brother's incarceration, the family received a directive through the AFP negotiators stationed in the family home 'to acquire as much instant cash as possible'.⁴⁷ Such action directly contradicted advice given to the family 'clearly and repeatedly that the Australian government does not pay ransoms'.⁴⁸

6.28 Not only did there appear to be a confused understanding of this no-ransom policy across agencies, but a lack of consistency or, at the very least, clarity in its application.

6.29 As the kidnapping also involved a Canadian citizen, the Australian and Canadian governments worked in conjunction.⁴⁹ Again there is evidence of inconsistency in policy. Nicole Bonney told the committee that at a meeting about six weeks after the kidnapping, family members were informed about the 'joint governments' mechanics of a kidnapping'.⁵⁰ It was explained to them that continuous communication with the kidnapers was essential to establish a rapport with the

43 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 5.

44 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 5. According to Mr Brennan and Ms Bonney this police officer 'is now actually working for the United Nations, was far better trained. He has trained, I think, FBI and CIA people in negotiating...has actually trained the AFP negotiators.'

45 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 6.

46 N Brennan, *Submission 12*, [p. 14].

47 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 6].

48 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 6].

49 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 4]. Also see [p. 23] of Mrs Bonney's submission where she provides another example of conflicting advice on paying a ransom.

50 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 9].

kidnappers. Both the next of kin negotiator and government negotiators in Nairobi had this role. She then explained that without their knowledge or discussion the Australian government in conjunction with the Canadian government implemented a strategy of not communicating with the kidnappers at all.⁵¹ In her view, this approach was 'the polar opposite to what had been previously described as essential kidnapping negotiator techniques'.⁵² Moreover, according to Mrs Bonney this strategy was eventually discarded three weeks after the family raised their serious concerns with the Minister about this strategy.⁵³

Managing a hostage crisis

6.30 Mr Brennan was of the view that the Australian government's management of his case for 10½ months may have prolonged his period in captivity.⁵⁴ His sister believed that the strategies implemented by the Australian government were ineffective and that Nigel's kidnapping 'was beyond the realm of the Australian government's knowledge and capabilities'.⁵⁵ She told the committee:

The Australian government had the finances and resources but not the ability to facilitate Nigel's release. We had none of that and achieved what the Australian government could not do—his freedom.⁵⁶

6.31 A member of a response team dealing with international kidnap for ransom and threat extortion for the insurance sector for 18 years was of the same opinion. In his estimation, Australia's response to Nigel Brennan's kidnapping was naïve and:

...the actions or lack thereof taken by the Australian Government were directly responsible for increased suffering and prolonging the time in captivity of Nigel Brennan.⁵⁷

6.32 The committee understands that DFAT officials do not have a great deal of long-term practical expertise with kidnappings abroad. Mr Philp informed the committee that following the Wood kidnapping, some of the members of that team were immediately put onto the Brennan case after his kidnapping.⁵⁸ He also noted that in terms of obtaining expertise at the outset of, and throughout, the case, particularly on the ground in Nairobi where DFAT's forward team was based, DFAT spoke to private companies that specialise in hostage release. According to Mr Philp,

51 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 9].

52 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 10].

53 N Bonney, *Submission 13*, [p. 10].

54 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 2.

55 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 3.

56 *Committee Hansard*, 11 October 2011, p. 3.

57 Confidential submission.

58 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

the discussions involved the companies' 'experience in Somalia, how they dealt with it and what they could suggest to us about methods, operations, tactics and so on'.⁵⁹

6.33 Considering the department's access to countries such as Canada and the private companies, Mr Philp was of the view that despite the intermittent requirement to respond to a hostage situation in a practical sense, DFAT officers 'upskill very quickly as it happens'.⁶⁰ He noted that, since the Brennan case, DFAT have not had specific discussions with the specialist K&R groups about how to create a degree of expertise that would take the department through to the next incident. In his view, consular people undertake a lot of training that is relevant but not specifically with the private sector.⁶¹

6.34 Ms Bird noted, however, that the role of specialist K&R companies was to negotiate ransoms. She reminded the committee that the 'basic starting point is that the government will not negotiate a ransom payment'. She explained:

We do not do that; that is not our role. So we have talked to other governments and others who are involved in kidnapping about how they handle the case and what you can do short of facilitating a ransom payment. Since we are not going to pay a ransom, that particular expertise is not relevant.⁶²

6.35 The committee is of the view that the department may not have fully appreciated the work and extent of expertise of those engaged in this K&R activity. The committee took evidence in camera from people active in this field of managing a release through the payment of a ransom. DFAT's lack of understanding means that its officers are missing out on a vital source of intelligence and not tapping into a wealth of practical experience. Consequently, they are not well placed to provide advice to families who may wish to go down the path toward paying a ransom.

6.36 If private companies are to continue to assume a role in securing the release of hostages, it is imperative that DFAT have a sound understanding and appreciation of their work. One of the kidnap and ransom consultants informed the committee that he would 'relish the opportunity to run simulation based training for crisis management teams' and have more dialogue and interaction to demonstrate the expertise that exists.⁶³

6.37 The committee is of the view that government agencies handling a hostage situation could benefit from obtaining intelligence and advice from such consultants to assist in their assessment of the situation and analysis of options. Keeping in mind,

59 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

60 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

61 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

62 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 32.

63 In camera evidence.

DFAT's statement that it would seek information from 'any avenue possible to support a comprehensive, whole-of-government response', the committee believes that the department should be more open to engaging with K&R companies.⁶⁴

6.38 Clearly, if the government's policy is no ransom and no concessions to kidnappers in a situation where the payment of a ransom offers the safest and quickest route to freedom, then it must accept its limitations and assist others more suited to the task as best it can.

A specialist unit in DFAT

6.39 Despite the rapid response by a specialist team to his brother's kidnapping, Dr Wood was of the view that there is a role for a special unit or special training for people in the Public Service who would be ready for any future kidnapping. He believed that such a capacity should exist and would like to think that 'there are people in the consular branch of Foreign Affairs and police who might [have] greater expertise' than he felt they had six years ago.⁶⁵ Mr Martinkus 'wholeheartedly endorsed' such a proposal for a specialist team.⁶⁶

6.40 The findings of the McCarthy review suggested that the present day equivalent of the CRG, needed to be reinvigorated and improved. It recommended the establishment of a regular, high level and whole of government coordinating group to ensure a core group remains abreast of kidnapping issues and to form the nucleus of a future response. DFAT informed the committee that an interdepartmental emergency task force (IDETF) of key agencies has met to discuss the recommendations of the McCarthy Review. This group will form the nucleus of a regular coordinating group.⁶⁷

6.41 The committee believes that the need for a specialist group designed to respond to incidents such as kidnapping remains as strong now as it was when the CRG was established in 1996. It fully supports the establishment of a regular, whole of government coordinating group. It recognises, however, the difficulty keeping a team well trained and prepared to manage a crisis such as an overseas hostage situation when such incidents occur infrequently. The main concern is that staff rotations and the irregularity of incidents may erode the enthusiasm and support for the team over time. A second important matter that the committee believes that DFAT needs to consider is the management of a protracted hostage situation such as the Brennan case.

64 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 4].

65 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 7.

66 *Committee Hansard*, 6 October 2011, p. 11.

67 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 9].

Recommendation 2

6.42 The committee supports the establishment of the regular, whole of government coordinating group and recommends that DFAT give close consideration to how it can maintain the high level of skills that members of an interdepartmental emergency task force require to respond effectively to a kidnapping incident overseas.

Recommendation 3

6.43 In particular, the committee recommends that the coordinating group:

- **commits to regular meetings and keeping up-to-date with global developments in kidnapping and hostage taking;**
- **assumes responsibility for ensuring that there is a pool of specially trained personnel across all relevant agencies ready to respond to an incident such as a kidnapping abroad;**
- **oversees the training regime of this pool of specialists that places a high priority on continuous improvement in interagency coordination and cooperation through joint training programs and workshops;**
- **in consultation with other countries and organisations involved in resolving hostage situations, explores and develops strategies for dealing with protracted hostage episodes; and**
- **gives special attention to developing a pool of personnel ready to take on the functions of family liaison and ensures that this sub group is seen as an integral part of any interdepartmental emergency task force (see recommendation at paragraph 7.52).**

6.44 The McCarthy review also suggested that the government consider establishing a bipartisan convention on handling of abductions, particularly those with a national security element.⁶⁸ DFAT informed the committee that the Minister for Foreign Affairs has directed DFAT to provide further recommendations on establishing a bipartisan convention and the Opposition have indicated that they are supportive in principle.⁶⁹

6.45 Finally in this regard, the McCarthy review recommended the establishment of a regular consultative mechanism with partner countries, to discuss the broad complexities of kidnapping cases and opportunities for cooperation. DFAT informed the committee that it would be meeting with partner countries as part of regular consular talks soon. According to the department, kidnapping is one agenda item and the government will look to develop further cooperation with our partners on this issue.

68 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 9].

69 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Submission 8*, [p. 9].

6.46 The committee welcomes these initiatives and would like to be kept informed of developments toward the bipartisan, or more appropriately multi-partisan, convention and the consultative mechanism with partner countries.

Conclusion

6.47 The committee recognises the need for DFAT to have a small specialised, highly trained unit ready to be activated should a crisis such as a hostage situation develop overseas. The small group should have the knowledge, experience, skills and institutional linkages to be able to marshal the resources of relevant agencies to deal with the matter. It should also be aware of its limitations, especially in respect of Australia's no-ransom policy, and be ready and willing to provide assistance to others who may be in a better position to secure the release of a hostage.

