



Australian Government
Department of Defence
Ministerial Services and Public Affairs



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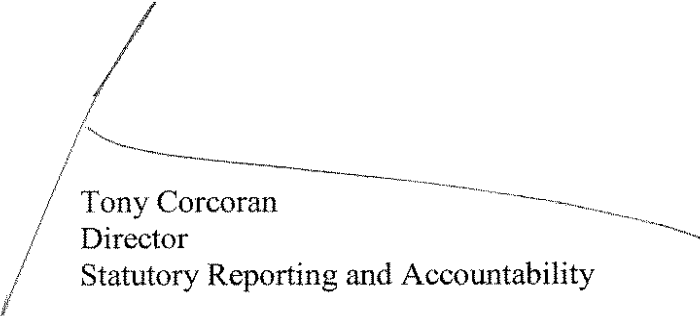
Ms Louise Gell
Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Gell

Thank you for your letter to Mr Ric Smith, AO, PSM, Secretary of the Department of Defence, requesting input to the committee's inquiry into Australian expatriates.

A submission approved by the Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Robert Hill, is attached.

Yours sincerely



Tony Corcoran
Director
Statutory Reporting and Accountability

SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENCES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIAN EXPATRIATES

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE SUBMISSION

Introduction

1. Defence recognises that its people are one of its most important assets. Defence presently has over 2350 personnel working overseas in various countries throughout the world. This number includes about 1550 personnel deployed in Iraq, East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Sinai, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo undertaking tasks that include border protection, peace monitoring, peace keeping, and nation building.
2. In addition, there are around 800 Defence personnel overseas performing non-operational duties covering exchanges, participation on courses, assignments to integrated/attached positions, representational functions and acquisition and through life support activities. These personnel face many challenges in their work and personal life, and Defence seeks to assist them to enhance workforce capability, retention, family functioning and well-being. The health and safety of Defence personnel and their families is a significant consideration. Personnel have provided insight into the needs and concerns faced by them, albeit as temporary expatriates, that relate to this Inquiry.

Context

3. The issues raised in this submission represent the views of Australian Defence personnel posted overseas who are overseas for a defined purpose and duration, in an official capacity. In some ways, the limited time period and support provided by the Department of Defence can ease the process for them and reduce problems. In addition, the Australian Government community provides a ready social network base. On the other hand, some Defence personnel overseas are located in potentially hazardous or difficult environments, where the normal expatriate or tourist would not normally travel.

Support provided by the Department of Defence

4. A large number of Defence personnel have served and continue to serve overseas, and thus Defence has developed a range of conditions of service packages to support overseas personnel, both in work and personal circumstances. As Defence personnel not involved in operations are often accompanied by their families, Defence tries to deliver family and personal support services, information and programs. The range of conditions of service packages are designed to meet the needs of a number of categories of overseas service, including:

- Short-term duty overseas;
- Long-term duty overseas;
- Deployments overseas; and
- APS employees in support of ADF operations overseas.

The details of these packages are available at www.defence.gov.au/dpe/dpedet.

5. For those personnel on operations and exercises overseas, Defence maintains a National Welfare Coordination Centre to provide effective welfare support to families of all personnel, both service and civilian, away from their home location. This includes a 24-hour

information and referral service, a database of emergency contacts, and coordinates notifications and welfare investigations. A Special Needs Support Group also assists families with special needs.

6. Prior to departure, Defence assists personnel and their families to prepare for life in a new country. Where appropriate, language training is provided. Defence personnel generally have contact with existing overseas post staff upon arrival to answer any questions and resolve problems. For the larger posts, a pre-departure briefing is provided so that personnel going in-country know what to expect, and what issues may arise.

7. Once the personnel are in-country, Defence provides information support, particularly with regard to education for children, housing and safety issues. Some postings can be particularly stressful to families; for a range of such postings in the Asia-Pacific region, "social work case work" assistance is provided to families. This involves particularly close family assistance.

8. Defence funds the employment of part-time Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) in PNG, one of the largest Defence long-term posting locations in the Asia-Pacific region. There are also Defence CLOs in London and Washington, where some 60 percent of non-operational Defence personnel are located. CLOs, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) are also available in most other overseas posts. CLOs provide support for local issues that overseas personnel might encounter. This has included insurance claims for motor vehicle accidents, searching for appropriate accommodation, health care for families, and education for dependants.

9. Personnel in Butterworth also have access to Family Liaison Officers who assist families with community based information and family support activities, such as welcome activities. Regional Education Liaison Officers who assist families with matters relating to education are employed by DFAT. The Defence post also assists in providing support for administrative issues.

Needs and concerns of overseas Australians

10. Defence personnel have raised a range of issues which they have encountered during their experiences overseas. The issues can be summarised into four main categories: acclimatisation, information access, knowledge of Australian Government requirements, and access to services.

Acclimatisation

11. Defence personnel noted the importance of all potential expatriates being realistic and informed about circumstances in the country they are moving to, and the services provided by overseas post staff. Defence personnel commented that some expatriates expected unrealistic responses from overseas post staff to personal administration issues. Information sessions or a booklet prior to relocation, perhaps available on a website (such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)) may ease culture shock, homesickness and prevent negative situations (eg. unexpected costs and red tape) for those people who relocate without the benefit of a sponsoring organisation.

12. Respondents also noted the difficulties in obtaining recognition for past histories of credit, car ownership, driving experience and professional qualifications (especially for the spouses of Defence personnel) in a number of countries, particularly the US. This can cause administrative difficulties, and slow the process of adapting to a country, and obtaining employment for many.

Information access

13. In countries where personal security is an issue, providing information to those entering and residing in the country is important to raise awareness of security problems, terrorism issues and other areas of concern. Prior to deployment in troubled areas, Defence personnel are briefed on personal security, where necessary, and have contact with existing staff at embassies, but other expatriates may not be aware of such issues, and detailed or region-specific information may not be readily available in certain countries. It is suggested that the DFAT website which has general advice and travel bulletins on travel risks in a country is further publicised to make all travellers aware of conditions of localised violence or security concerns.

Knowledge of Australian Government requirements

14. A number of respondents expressed concerns and uncertainty about some government requirements such as voting and new Government administrative processes. Some individuals experienced difficulties in determining their voting rights while overseas, lacking relevant, consistent and accurate information. Other issues such as Government changes to existing processes, such as Medicare or health insurance may also need publicising. It may be beneficial to make brochures available at embassies outlining these requirements, including details of a website or telephone contact where difficult queries can be addressed.

Access to services

15. A major concern for Defence personnel, notably in less developed countries, was health care. Where necessary, medical evacuations for Defence personnel and their families (and other Government officials) are provided. Facilities in some countries are unavailable or erratic, and may not necessarily meet requirements should there be a large-scale emergency, as was the case in Bali. In such circumstances, an evacuation or medivac plan should be prepared.

Conclusion

16. Defence is one of the most experienced government agencies in looking after overseas personnel, as overseas service has long been an integral part of Defence's function. The long history of overseas service has resulted in a considerable body of knowledge which has led to the formulation of a range of condition of service packages for Defence personnel. Despite this, Defence personnel overseas are from a wide range of backgrounds and have differing requirements and concerns, not all of which can be easily resolved by the Department. As a whole however, Defence personnel commented that they felt privileged to have the opportunity to work overseas and be enriched by the experience.

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