



**AIR CHIEF MARSHAL M.D. BINSKIN, AC**  
**CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**Opening Statement**  
**Budget Estimates Hearing**  
**19 October 2016**

*Delivered by*  
*Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, Vice Chief of the Defence Force*

*\*\*Check against delivery\*\**

Good morning Senators, the Chief of the Defence Force is currently in Washington to participating in the global Defence Chiefs' meeting to counter Daesh (also known as ISIL) and violent extremism. He sends his apologies.

Senators, I'd like to begin this morning by updating the committee on the status of the investigation into a Coalition airstrike in Eastern Syria on Saturday, 17 September (Syrian Time) where it is alleged that Syrian military forces were killed. It is a matter of public record that elements of the Australian Air Task Group were among a number of international aircraft taking part in Coalition operations around Dayr az Zawr at the time.

Coalition aircraft were conducting strikes against what was believed to be a Daesh position. After bombing commenced, Russian officials advised the Combined Air and Space Operations Centre that the targets may have been Syrian military personnel. Bombing ceased immediately and an inquiry commenced soon after the alleged incident with an Australian Defence Force legal officer assisting this investigation.

As you will appreciate, Syria is a difficult and dynamic operating environment and it will take time to fully understand the details of a complex incident like this involving multiple aircraft from multiple nations. While I am cautious about fuelling any speculation on the outcome of the inquiry, we have been patently clear that Australia would never intentionally target a known Syrian Government military unit or actively support Daesh. The ADF employs a strict targeting process that has been discussed a number of times before this committee and we continue to operate with the highest levels of discipline, proportionality and discrimination. That said, Australia is cooperating fully with the inquiry and we expect the findings to be released once it is complete. However, it is important to let this process take its course without prejudice.

Air operations over Syria and Iraq are just one part of Australia's overall contribution to the fight against Daesh. ADF personnel on the ground in Iraq are providing critical

training to the local forces that has translated into battlefield victories. In addition to the Special Operations Task Group Advise and Assist mission, the combined Australian-New Zealand training unit known as Task Group Taji has now trained over 12,000 regular Iraqi Army personnel. The training has increased the Iraqi Security Forces' confidence and capability. This improvement, combined with support from Coalition airstrikes, has practically halved the amount of Daesh-held territory in Iraq over the last two years.

Senators, I understand the significant interest in current operations around Mosul, particularly the level of Australian involvement. The ADF elements assigned to Operation Okra are supporting the Iraqi Security Forces. I will not go into specific details for operational security reasons, however, ADF elements operating as part of the broader US-led coalition, will continue to provide support to the Iraqi Security Forces throughout the Mosul offensive.

Our Air Task Group will continue to conduct airstrikes and provide air support, including air-to-air refuelling, as part of the Coalition's broader operations in Iraq and Syria.

The Australian Special Operations Task Group will continue to support the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service in a remote advise and assist capacity, including remote-based joint terminal attack control while the Task Group Taji trained soldiers will likely be employed in the Mosul offensive.

Notwithstanding current efforts to retake Mosul, as territorial gains continue to grow and the Iraqi Forces continue to force Daesh back, our training mission will evolve and expand to include Iraqi Federal Law Enforcement Agencies and Local Police, who will be responsible for holding and securing recovered ground. Based on the Iraqi Government's current planning, we anticipate the first Federal Police will commence training at the Taji Military Complex by the end of 2016. Despite the increased trainee pool, no additional Australian or New Zealand personnel will be required and I expect the number of ADF personnel deployed to Task Group Taji to remain at around 300 in the immediate future.

Around 270 ADF personnel are also deployed to Australia's other major operation in Afghanistan, filling embedded staff appointments in the NATO led Resolute Support Mission and providing advisers and force protection personnel to a number of Afghan agencies, including the Afghan National Army Officer Academy in Kabul. Most ADF personnel are based in and around Kabul and Kandahar, but we maintain an interest in the security situation in Uruzgan where thousands of Australians, including our fallen soldiers served during Operation Slipper.

Senators, last month media reports emerged claiming the Taliban had launched a major attack in the Uruzgan capital, Tarin Kot. These reports were based on Taliban propaganda declaring Government controlled outposts had been overrun along with the local airfield and a strategic military base. While it is evident some checkpoints around Tarin Kot came under small-scale attack, operational reporting confirms the city was not in danger of being overrun and the military base remains secure. I can say this with confidence because the Commander of Australia's Task Group Afghanistan, Brigadier Cheryl Pearce and the Australian Ambassador to Afghanistan,

Mr Richard Feakes, flew into Tarin Kot shortly after the alleged attack to attend a security meeting or Shura as it is known.

They met at the base in Tarin Kot, with the Uruzgan Provincial Governor and the Regional Afghan National Security and Defense Force Commander who also confirmed that the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces retained control of Tarin Kot. This is consistent with our own observations and assessment. We have seen some increase in insurgent activity around Tarin Kot, but not on the scale declared in Taliban propaganda.

The insurgency employs these aggressive deception tactics in an attempt to rally fighters and instil fear among the Afghan population. We have seen the Taliban post exaggerated propaganda about spectacular attacks around Helmand, Uruzgan and Kunduz when in reality these assaults have been relatively small-scale and short-lived and Afghan security forces have retained control of key centres.

We should not be surprised that the security situation in Afghanistan and Uruzgan remains challenging but we should be careful not to judge the progress of the Afghan forces on unsubstantiated social media reports. We have long indicated that there may be setbacks and there will be gains as the fledgling Afghan National Defense and Security Forces continue to mature. Importantly, the Afghans have demonstrated improved fighting skills and a willingness to defend their people. Our current mission in Afghanistan, as part of the broader NATO mission, is based on denying safe havens for terrorist organisations; and empowering the Afghan to fight for themselves is part of that strategy.

The ADF is also doing important work closer to home. One of our most significant recurring operations, Operation Render Safe, recently concluded in the Solomon Islands.

Over four weeks, explosive ordnance and community engagement specialists from Navy, Army and Air Force located and destroyed more than 10 tonnes of unexploded World War II ordnance. Removing these remnants of war reduces the risk of casualties to create a safer environment for the local population. It also increases the country's economic prospects by opening up more agricultural land and making the waterways safer for fishermen.

Together with our colleagues from New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, the ADF also passed on valuable lessons to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. Building the local explosive ordnance disposal capability is one of the enduring aspects of Operation Render Safe and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force continues to demonstrate improved skills and knowledge during partnered clearance operations.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the recent ADF assistance to flood affected communities in New South Wales and South Australia. The ADF filled and delivered more than 100,000 sandbags to South Australia to support the flood relief effort.

Almost 300 Army and Air Force personnel provided support on the ground filling, transporting and placing sandbags to protect communities in a number of rain affected locations around Two Wells and Port Wakefield in South Australia.

A smaller contingent deployed to New South Wales where they helped the local emergency services in Parkes, Forbes, Condobolin and West Wyalong to deliver sandbags, equipment and supplies; build levees; conduct route reconnaissance and mapping tasks; and most importantly, to evacuate vulnerable citizens, stranded residents and tourists.

Senators, Regardless of the mission, whether combat operations in the skies of Iraq or supporting Australian communities in need of assistance, the Australian Defence Force continues to demonstrate the highest levels of professionalism, dedication and compassion.

**ENDS**