

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE PORTFOLIO

SUBMISSION TO SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19, 11 May 2020

The Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio is supporting the Government's COVID-19 response through foreign, trade, investment, tourism and development policy; maintaining consular and passport services for Australians; supporting our exporters and businesses (including in tourism and education); and ensuring the welfare of staff in Australia and overseas.

The portfolio has been working 24/7 to help Australians overseas and provide up-to-date travel advice (1,674 updates since 21 January). Since 13 March, over 300,000 Australians and permanent residents have returned home, with over 16,500 of these directly assisted by the Government, including over 6,500 passengers from 53 cruise ships. We have worked closely with other national governments so Australians could board a number of their facilitated flights. DFAT's consular service has fielded over 40,600 calls since 13 March.

The portfolio is supporting the Government's economic recovery efforts, including through the Government's [Relief and Recovery Fund](#) (managed by the Department of Infrastructure). This includes the \$110 million *International Freight Assistance Mechanism*, administered by Austrade, to accelerate delivery of agricultural and fisheries exports and additional funding for Austrade's *Export Market Development Grants*. Austrade is also delivering a borderless online and digital education initiative for international students.

Export Finance Australia's \$500 million *COVID-19 Export Capital Facility* gives exporters access to business-saving loans. Tourism Australia is pivoting its resources to the domestic market, including the launch of the *Live from Aus* initiative. It is conducting weekly webinars to help the tourism industry position itself to respond to the crisis.

DFAT is pursuing Australia's geostrategic and economic interests in key international groupings and bilaterally to build a coordinated international response, resolve disruptions in global supply chains and keep markets open. DFAT and Austrade are working to secure access to vital medical equipment and supplies, and to support economic recovery in the Indo-Pacific. Portfolio agencies' business and economic intelligence is providing insights to Government and helping businesses overcome fast-evolving COVID-19-related challenges internationally.

DFAT is working to secure an independent review of the COVID-19 outbreak to clarify facts around the genesis of the epidemic, its development into a pandemic, and the WHO's response. We are working to ensure that the world learns lessons from this unprecedented crisis and is best placed to address similar challenges in the future.

DFAT is leading the Government's efforts to promote a positive and accurate narrative about Australia's actions and regional role, and cooperating with like-minded countries to counter disinformation.

DFAT is re-shaping Australia's \$4 billion international development assistance program to respond to COVID-19. Immediate priorities include ensuring health security, stability and economic recovery in the region. We are working to maintain a humanitarian and essential services corridor to the Pacific and Timor-Leste to allow the movement of international health experts and essential supplies. We are also working with partners, including Indonesia, to lay the groundwork for economic recovery. ACIAR's research and networks will contribute to this effort.

Around 80 per cent of staff in portfolio agencies are working on the COVID-19 response, with nearly 200 redeployed to other APS agencies. Around 300 portfolio staff and 800 dependants have come out of Posts on welfare, medical and safety grounds.