



Australian Government
Department of Defence

**Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
References Committee**

Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

Department of Defence

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Defence Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee on Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

Over twenty years, more than 39,000 Australian Defence Force (ADF) members and Defence civilians served in Afghanistan. ADF personnel fought alongside Coalition and Afghan partners to deny Afghanistan as a safe haven for international terrorism. We were successful in disrupting the ability of extremist groups to plan, execute, or support terrorist attacks on our soil or that of our partners. Our people did so in numerous acts of valour and bravery. This helped to protect the safety and security of Australians at home and abroad.

Defence personnel worked alongside Australian diplomats, police officers and aid workers, and with Afghan and coalition partners, to improve the security and welfare of millions of Afghans. Defence contributed more than US\$680 million to the Afghan National Army Trust Fund during this twenty-year period.

Australia went into Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks with the United States and NATO allies in 2001. And our withdrawal, from what became our nation's longest war, was in coordination with those same partners twenty years later. Partners without whom we could not have remained in Afghanistan.

Tragically, 41 Australians died on operations in Afghanistan, making the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. More returned home with lasting physical and mental injuries, and we have lost further Defence personnel since they returned home. Defence is proud of the commitment of our personnel and the contributions they made individually, and as a team.

Assessing the success and costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan necessarily includes consideration of the findings of the Inspector General of the ADF's Afghanistan inquiry report. This important work takes place within the larger context of the activities and achievements of the ADF and partner agencies in Afghanistan over the last twenty years.

Australia's evacuation operation from Kabul was one of the largest humanitarian airlift operations in our history. Defence is proud of the role undertaken by ADF personnel in providing both logistical and operational support. Between 18 and 26 August 2021, the ADF flew 32 missions into Hamid Karzai International Airport and evacuated over 4,100 people, a much greater number than initially thought possible.

In support of the evacuation, Defence deployed over 300 additional personnel to the Middle East to support those personnel already deployed at our main logistics hub and to work alongside our allies and partners. The United Kingdom and the United States enabled Australia's efforts through their coordination of the evacuation, and we could not have evacuated those that we did without their support, nor could we have continued evacuation operations after their departure. Australia worked closely with partners throughout the region as well as with the New Zealand Defence Force. In addition to aircrew, Defence provided personnel who undertook security, liaison, and medical roles.

Defence force assigned two C-130J Hercules, two C-17A Globemasters, and one KC-30 Air to Air refuelling aircraft.

The evacuation was staged through Defence's main logistic hub in the United Arab Emirates, involving personnel from across government to enable the movement of evacuees to Australia. The ADF brought in food, water and basic shelter to Kabul international airport during the evacuation operation. Evacuees transitioned through Australia's main logistics hub involving short-notice establishment of temporary facilities to accommodate, feed, and provide medical care for several thousand evacuees, before moving to Australia. This included Australian citizens, Australian permanent residents and former Defence Locally Engaged Employees (LEE) and their families under the LEE visa program and other visa classes.

Defence's efforts to facilitate the departure of Afghan nationals and their families who worked with and alongside the ADF represent a continuation of a program that has been in place since 1 January 2013. The LEE program has enabled the resettlement of Defence LEE and their immediate family members at risk of harm. Since 2013, more than 2,000 Afghan LEE and their families have been resettled in Australia under this program.

In the lead-up to Australia's withdrawal from Afghanistan, Defence accelerated efforts to certify eligible LEE applicants. Following advice from Home Affairs, the Minister for Immigration enabled access to s449 urgent humanitarian visas for Afghans with strong connections to the ADF and thereby at greater risk of harm. This included the family of Afghan defence personnel studying at Australian military colleges, those who had studied, and the families of serving ADF living in Afghanistan.

The Chief of the Defence Force and relevant areas of the intelligence community provided advice to Government during the course of the conflict on the security risks to Australian personnel in Afghanistan, including those based at the Embassy. On 15 April 2021, the Prime Minister announced Australia would withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan following US and NATO announcements on their own withdrawals. By that time, the ADF had already drawn down to 80 personnel.

The final ADF personnel withdrew in mid-June 2021. The Prime Minister announced the decision to close the Australian Embassy in Kabul on 25 May 2021. The LEE visa program was managed from the Embassy in Amman since October 2020.

The withdrawal of Australian forces from Afghanistan is consistent with Government direction to prioritise ADF resources towards the Indo-Pacific region, as set out in the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*. As Defence focusses on our immediate region, we remain prepared to make military contributions outside of our immediate region where it is in our interests to do so. This includes contributions in support of US-led coalitions and counter-terrorism actions in the Middle East.

Our enduring interests in the Middle East region are centred on counter-terrorism, ensuring the ADF's global mobility, multilateral security cooperation and bilateral defence cooperation with regional partners. Defence will build upon our established relationships in order to ensure access to the region for crisis response and protection of Australian interests.

Defence is committed to supporting ADF personnel who served in Afghanistan over the twenty-year history of our engagement, including those who delivered the successful evacuation from Kabul. This includes prioritising the mental health of serving personnel and veterans, and preserving the legacy of their achievements. We welcome the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide as an opportunity to learn and strengthen our approach to the mental health and welfare of our people.

Defence continues to provide ADF members access to the most comprehensive mental health care services in Australia, and has invested heavily in research, education, awareness, and improving access to mental health care.

Our demand-driven health system is command-responsive and member-centred. Mental health services that we provide range from education and awareness programs, to treatment and rehabilitation. We utilise a comprehensive network of mental health providers as well as access to specialist mental health services (e.g. psychiatrists) to ensure the needs of serving members are met. This means serving ADF members have access to the right support, especially to those who are vulnerable or at risk.

Non-liability health care is also provided through the Department of Veterans' Affairs for anyone who has served for at least one day in the ADF. This is also available for Reservists who have been on Continuous Full Time Service, or provided service during disaster relief, border protection services or been involved in service related accidents.

In response to the recent developments in Afghanistan, Defence has developed a set of specific mental health resources to support ADF members and Defence Australian Public Service (APS) employees. These resources include a guide for commanders, managers and peers outlining the range of support and resources that can be accessed, including mental health awareness packages and programs, mental health screening options, and the contact details for routine support.