

Defence Portfolio

COMMITTEE INQUIRY QUESTION

(Question No. 1)

Julian Hill MP asked the Department of Defence upon notice, on 14 April 2021:

Mr HILL: When our Vice-Chief of the Australian Defence Force had the phone call with Soe Win, why didn't Australia release a formal public statement in English and Burmese, given the regime immediately used that phone call to express support for the junta? In the new light of Myanmar, wasn't that to be expected?

Mr Jeffrey: I will take on notice exactly what was released. We did announce that the call had occurred. It is, as you would know, Mr Hill, standard diplomatic practice to keep the precise content of calls such as this confidential. When there is a read-out of the calls, it's usually done with the approval of both sides; you essentially say you agree to outline what was said. It's not clear to me whether there was any such agreement to release, but I can take on notice exactly what did occur.

Mr HILL: I understand and respect the fact that that's standard diplomatic practice. This is not a standard diplomatic environment. It appears that calls like that can and will be used for propaganda purposes to convey or try to claim legitimacy, which is not our intention. So could you take that on notice because I think it's a serious issue, particularly given, as you say, there is going to be a need for national interest and other purposes to maintain some dialogue, as occurred over many decades in very difficult and often toxic environments. I understand that. I think Australians would want to be assured that we're not going to be misused for propaganda purposes and that dialogue is not going to be misunderstood.

Mr Jeffrey: I take your point, Senator. We will take that on notice. I will just add that the act of engaging to relay our concerns around, in this case, Professor Turnell does not come without the risk that the Tatmadaw will use it for their own political purposes. I think in this case we would all judge that the ability to register our deep concerns about the safety of Professor Turnell and all Australians outweighs the risk of that call being used for pretty transparent political purposes.

Julian Hill MP – The Department of Defence has provided the following answer to the member's question:

The Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Vice Admiral David Johnston AO RAN, spoke with the Deputy Commander-in Chief of the Myanmar military, Vice Senior General Soe Win, on 22 February 2021. A media response regarding the engagement was released on 23 February 2021, stating that Vice Admiral Johnston expressed Australia's deep concern at the situation in Myanmar and reiterated Australia's call for the immediate release of Professor Sean Turnell.