

Defence Portfolio

COMMITTEE INQUIRY QUESTION

(Question No. 2)

The Honourable Kevin Andrews MP asked the Department of Defence, upon notice, on 13 April 2021:

Mr ANDREWS: The ASPI online journal, *The Strategist*, reported on 23 February this year: Each night for more than a week, unregistered flights between Yangon and Kunming have been transporting unknown goods and personnel from China to Myanmar. The military regime that's now in charge of Myanmar is trying very hard to hide the flights. The Chinese government and Myanmar Airways have claimed the planes were carrying seafood exports. However, the details of the flights in question make that highly unlikely. When the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, took over the country, it banned international flights. Very few flights are now using Yangon airport, and even fewer are flying internationally. But averaging five flights a night, up to three planes have been making trips to Kunming in southern China. The author of the article, Ms Hutchinson, suggests two possibilities for what the planes are carrying: One is that they're bringing in Chinese troops and cyber specialists to help the Tatmadaw control access to information and the internet. The other is that they're increasing the Tatmadaw's weapons stores. My questions in light of that report are the following. Firstly, what information or intelligence does the government or various departments have about such flights, and are they continuing? Have they continued since the report at the end of February? Secondly, what information or intelligence does the government have in relation to what is being carried on such flights. For example, are they Chinese troops, is there Chinese military equipment being exported to Myanmar for the use of the regime, or is cyber equipment being transported from China for the use of the regime in Myanmar?

Mr Jeffrey: Mr Andrews, you will of course appreciate I'm not at liberty in this form to go into or report on intelligence that the government may or may not have. What I can do is take on notice anything that the department can say about international shipments, but, obviously, there will be limits within which we can talk about in the public domain.

Mr ANDREWS: Some of this information is in the public domain; there are reports in the public domain. I fully understand, given the role I once occupied, the sensitivities around the provision of certain information, but I think information that could be provided to the committee, even in a confidential way, would be useful in terms of our understanding, our response and many submissions or further lines of inquiry we may wish to pursue as the parliament.

Mr Jeffrey: I'll take that on notice, Senator, and if a private briefing is required I will recommend that.

The Honourable Kevin Andrews MP – The Department of Defence has provided the following answer to the Honourable Member's question:

Defence is aware of the report cited by Mr Andrews.

The nature and details of Defence's intelligence capabilities and assessments are classified and cannot be provided in this forum.