



**Australian Government**  

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**Department of Defence**

## **Senate Select Committee on COVID-19**

### **Department of Defence Written Submission**

**May 2020**

***THE DEFENCE RESPONSE TO COVID-19***

This is a submission by the Department of Defence to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, outlining the measures Defence took to respond to the pandemic and to contribute to the broader Australian Government response. It is intended to complement the whole of government submission developed by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

***Defence responds***

The Surgeon-General of the Australian Defence Force is a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), the key decision-making committee for health emergencies – and as such, was involved in the discussion and assessment of the evolving situation from its earliest stages. Defence is also represented in the Communicable Diseases Network of Australia, which develops the public health guidelines for AHPPC endorsement.

As the spread of COVID-19 gathered pace around the world and the first cases began to appear in Australia, Defence prepared to respond by:

1. Preparing to contribute to the broader government effort to minimise the effect of COVID-19 on public health and the economy; and
2. Implementing measures to minimise the burden on the public health system and protect its own workforce, families, and capabilities, and by virtue the local communities near Defence facilities, from the virus.

These preparations commenced in late January, and by early February, Defence was issuing travel advice and restrictions for staff to reflect updates from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

From 27 January, Defence began to contribute to the emerging whole of government effort on COVID-19, beginning with planning to repatriate Australian citizens from Wuhan, China. Multiple repatriations from both Wuhan and Japan were conducted with Defence assistance, including ongoing garrison support at Christmas Island and Howard Springs quarantine facilities. These activities were carried out while the Defence response to the 2019-20 bushfire season was also underway.

On 9 March 2020, Defence established a COVID-19 task force, led by LTGEN John J. Frewen DSC AM, to work towards Departmental resilience and continuity, and to coordinate the Defence contribution to the national response to COVID-19. Defence subsequently established Joint Task Force 629 under Operation COVID-19 ASSIST, supported by a Joint Task Group in each state and territory to provide regional command and co-ordination of Defence contributions in support of relevant state and territory authorities.

***Support for federal and state/territory efforts***

The Defence contribution to the wider national effort falls into a number of categories – 1) support for public health, 2) support for the economy, while 3) maintaining the capacity to respond to other threats to national interests. As at 30 April 2020, Defence has identified additional expenditure of \$7.8 million associated with Defence contributions to the national

effort. This expenditure primarily relates to the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional deployment costs for Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel supporting the states and territories with a range of activities including contact tracing and quarantine checks. It does not include a number of in-kind arrangements or re-prioritisation of resources covered in the following sections, most notably, the support to industry.

Assistance from Defence to the national effort to contain COVID-19 is being co-ordinated by Emergency Management Australia (EMA). State and territory authorities request assistance through EMA, which prioritises those requests and consults Defence on its ability to meet these needs.

Over 2000 Defence personnel have been allocated to support national efforts to respond to COVID-19 – at its peak-to-date on 16 April 2020, this number was 2246 personnel. The nature of this support has ranged across a number of responsibilities on an as-required basis to complement federal or state and territory capacity, and is provided under the legal framework afforded by Defence Assistance to the Civil Community, and the Prime Minister's Direction under subsection 21(1) of the *Public Service Act 1999 – redeployment of APS employees to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic*. The assistance Defence provides under these authorities does not include any use of force, nor are ADF members empowered to perform law enforcement when serving alongside state and territory authorities.

From the period 29 January 2020 to 23 February 2020, Defence supported the Department of Health and Australian Border Force (ABF) with the transfer of Australian evacuees from Wuhan, China, and the *Diamond Princess* cruise vessel in Yokohama, Japan. Evacuees were transferred to quarantine facilities at Christmas Island and Howard Springs. Defence assistance to the operation of the quarantine facilities included garrison support and domestic airlift for equipment, ABF personnel, and Department of Health medical teams. Movement of repatriated Australian citizens occurred via ABF charter flight reception and staging activities at RAAF bases Learmonth and Darwin. At the peak of the repatriation activities, Defence provided around 150 ADF personnel. This included up to 130 personnel on Christmas Island.

Since then, the list of tasking that Defence has provided and supported has grown substantially and is constantly evolving in line with changing requirements from domestic authorities, and the capacity of Defence to provide. As a snapshot of the variety of tasks Defence personnel are assisting with, on 20 April 2020:

- Over 60 personnel were embedded as **planning and liaison** officers in federal, state and territory agencies;
- Over 200 Australian Public Service personnel were **seconded to Services Australia** to assist that agency to cope with the increase in demand for its services;
- Roughly 90 personnel were supporting most states and territories with **contact tracing**;
- Over 440 personnel were working alongside state and territory authorities to ensure **compliance with isolation requirements**;
- Over 250 personnel were engaged in **supporting border controls** with Western Australian, Queensland, and Northern Territory Police;

- Over 140 personnel supported Northern Territory and Queensland police in **protecting indigenous communities**;
- Over 30 Defence personnel assisted with quarantine measures at Queensland and New South Wales airports;
- Over 50 personnel were deployed to Tasmania, on **clinical duties at the North West Regional Hospital**; and
- Nine personnel from Defence Science and Technology were supporting the Government's **Ventilator Response Group**, seeking to ensure an adequate supply of ventilators for Australian needs.

Defence support has previously ranged from airlift of essential supplies to the preparation and distribution of food supplies to vulnerable people through Foodbank. From 7 March 2020 to 24 April 2020, Defence personnel supported the staff of Victorian company Med-Con Pty Ltd – Australia's only producer of surgical face masks – with production, machine operations training, maintenance, repair and warehousing to boost production capacity from two million surgical face masks per year to up to 50 million per year, with plans to increase this number even further. These are an example of the non-traditional tasks Defence personnel have carried out to support the national efforts in response to COVID-19.

The Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) has also contributed to the whole of government response to COVID-19, primarily through the work of ASD's Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC), and its functions as set out in Section 7 of the Intelligence Services Act 2001 (ISA).

Consistent with its core advisory and assistance function set out in the ISA, the ACSC has published COVID-19 specific cyber threat updates including case studies of COVID-19 related cyber scams, online fraud and phishing campaigns and practical advice for protecting individuals and organisations, particularly while working from home and using web conferencing systems during the pandemic.

ASD has used its offensive cyber capabilities to disrupt foreign cybercriminals responsible for COVID-19 themed malicious cyber activities. ASD has disrupted the activities of foreign criminals by disabling their infrastructure and blocking their access to stolen information.

ASD has engaged with hospitals and health service providers across the country to provide cyber security advice, share threat information and technical support to help mitigate cyber risks. The ACSC has assisted by running vulnerability scans on all Australian Government internet facing websites and is working with the Australian telecommunications industry to ensure malicious activity, such as ransomware and other forms of malware, are quickly identified and mitigated.

The ACSC has also provided advice and assistance to the Digital Transformation Agency (DTA) in relation to the cyber security of the COVIDSafe app.

### ***Support for industry***

Defence industry, especially the small and medium-sized businesses that are a critical part of the sector, has collectively worked extremely hard to keep their businesses running throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the pandemic, Defence's COVID-19 Taskforce established an Industry Support Cell on 25 March 2020. The Industry Support Cell's role is to respond quickly to urgent issues impacting defence industry and to cushion the impact of restrictions, such as cross-border movements and freight, on the ability of defence industry to equip and sustain the ADF.

Among the measures Defence has instituted to alleviate industry pressures includes bringing forward planned works on the Defence estate and seeking the assistance of our prime contractors to focus on the engagement of small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) to do so. Defence's extensive supplier arrangements have also been used to support urgent procurement requirements from other Commonwealth agencies. Defence's expertise in commercial procurement, freight and logistics has been extended to support whole of government priorities in the rapid sourcing and transportation of medical supplies and personal protective equipment.

On 27 March 2020, the Minister for Defence and Minister for Defence Industry initiated weekly teleconferences with Chief Executives, peak industry bodies and State and Territory Defence Advocates. The Minister for Defence Industry continued to host these weekly calls to address issues raised by industry, provide regular updates and to hear new ideas direct from industry on how Defence could provide better support to small business during COVID19. Both Ministers received positive feedback from individual CEOs and peak industry bodies for the level of personal engagement and responsiveness that they and the Department of Defence have shown.

Throughout this period, Defence has remained committed to the ongoing delivery of critical capability for the ADF. Major programs such as the Naval Shipbuilding Program are supporting around 6,000 jobs across Australia. Rather than slowing down or stopping these programs, Defence is adapting to the current environment to continue business.

The Naval Shipbuilding College has reported an increase in interest in shipbuilding careers as it works to provide opportunities to workers displaced by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 5 May, more than 1300 people had started the College's Shipbuilding Taster Course since it went live on the College's website on 9 April. More than 2500 people had also joined the College's Workforce Register, which included a 20 per cent increase in 2020. The College is holding ongoing discussions with GM Holden, Qantas, Virgin Australia and other companies about how the skill sets of their workers can be adapted for careers in naval shipbuilding.

Since 27 March 2020, the Government announced the expansion of support for defence industry, to help the sector to weather the COVID-19 crisis. This includes several measures to support defence industry, including:

- Accelerating payments to Australian suppliers by processing payment the next business day after their invoice has been approved for payment by Defence, irrespective of the contracted payment terms;
- Encouraging industry primes to pass on early payments to subcontractors; and

- Providing appropriate relief to contractors in circumstances of demonstrated adverse effects as a result of the COVID-19 crisis on the supply of labour, equipment, materials or services required to meet current contractual obligations.

Approximately \$870 million worth of estate project works will be released onto AUSTENDER over the next eight months as part of Defence's usual estate works contracting processes. Defence has also injected an extra \$100 million into the Estate Works and Upkeep programs for the period February to June 2020, reprioritised from within Defence's Estate and Infrastructure Group.

An additional \$100 million in stimulus funding has also been included to target SMEs. This funding will be expended over the remainder of this financial year and into the next. Our Industry Primes are expanding their range of subcontracted suppliers through creating new registers of local SMEs, many of which have not previously worked on Defence work. The activities being undertaken had been identified on the Forward Work Program but had thus far been prioritised below the line within the funding available. Progressing these activities will improve the general condition of bases.

In line with the Minister for Finance's announcement on the Australian Government's Rent Relief Policy on 7 April 2020, Defence is implementing rental and operational cost relief for tenants on the Defence estate. There is an expectation the rent reductions are passed on by tenants to any sub-tenants they have. These measures include:

- Reducing rent to zero for not-for-profit organisations and SMEs that identify as experiencing hardship associated with the impacts of COVID-19; and
- Proportional reductions for civilian airfield operators and other larger entities that can evidence a degree of COVID-19 impacts on their business.

As at 5 May 2020, Defence has received 18 requests for rent-relief. In combination with the automatic relief offered to not-for-profit entities on the Defence estate, Defence agreed to reduce the rental charge to zero for 28 not-for-profit organisations and SME tenants. The rent reduction will be effective from 24 March 2020 for six months, with further review based on the longevity of COVID-19 restrictions. The total value of the rent abated for the 28 tenants over the six-month period is \$106 120.

### ***Defence Science and Technology***

Defence Science and Technology (DST) is lending its considerable scientific expertise to national efforts to research the virus and its mitigations. Many of these are under the umbrella of other national science efforts and agencies, but some are specific to DST.

DST contributes to the pandemic modelling being provided to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee on a bi-weekly basis. The effectiveness of social distancing measures and the effect of environmental factors are being investigated as additional variables. DST has also developed preliminary advice on the spread of COVID-19 on Navy ships and submarines.

Defence's has initiated a voluntary clinical trial of chloroquine as a preventative measure against COVID-19. This trial is seeking up to 700 civilian and Australian Defence Force (ADF) frontline healthcare workers and will examine whether this drug can prevent COVID-19. The trial is testing an existing and well-known drug for a new purpose, it is being tested as a preventative measure, not as a treatment, and is not a vaccine trial.

Currently there are 42 ADF healthcare volunteers enrolled and commenced in the 14 week trial. Additional volunteers, both civilian and ADF personnel, will commence pre-enrolment but further participation will depend on the transmission rate of COVID-19 within the community, which is currently low. The safety of all those involved in the trial, including our ADF personnel, is our highest priority. Participation in this trial is entirely voluntary. Potential volunteers must individually access and read all online information, watch a video explaining the trial and make an appointment to attend in-person for evaluation. They are then carefully screened against a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria, which includes an assessment of known allergies. A participant advocate will also provide volunteers with a confidential mechanism to provide advice and support. The trial commenced in April 2020 and is scheduled to report outcomes in November 2020.

DST is working with Axiom Precision Manufacturing and Health South Australia to rapidly design and produce face shields for frontline healthcare workers. The first manufacturing run commenced on 17 April 2020, and produced around 600 face shields, which were delivered to three South Australian hospitals on 21 April 2020 for evaluation. This will help to address the immediate shortfall in the supply of PPE, and also add to the capacity of domestic industry to supply these products. DST designed the face shield and manufactured a number of prototypes to use materials which Australia has ready access to, is lightweight, and is delivered at a price-point below that of imports. A larger prototype production run of 4000-5000 units is scheduled for early May 2020.

DST is working with two Australian companies – GeneWorks and Zip Diagnostics – on the development and manufacturing of a rapid, 15 minute point-of-care diagnostic device. This is in partnership with CSIRO's Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness.

In conjunction with CSIRO and the wider FIVE EYES community, DST is investigating COVID-19 virus survivability on various surfaces (including Australian bank notes), under different environmental conditions, and relating to methods to decontaminate PPE to allow for re-use.

At the request of the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources, and in response to early concern about the supply of ventilators, DST has developed designs and prototypes for the re-purposing of non-invasive ventilators for use as invasive ventilators in the treatment of COVID-19 patients. Manufacturing data packs for both ventilators will be completed by early May 2020, and the licensing of the designs to industry will then be possible if there is a future need.

Finally, under a long-standing partner agreement, DST have engaged DMTC Pty Ltd to develop an online portal to capture the ideas and input flowing in from industry and the research sector in relation to the COVID-19 response.

### ***International partnerships and support***

Australia's region is particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19, and also remains at risk from more common threats to regional security, such as natural disasters. Defence possesses capabilities uniquely suited to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and stabilisation in the region, in support of the Federal Government lead agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It is highly likely that Australian assistance will be sought within the region while management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia is ongoing.

The impact of Cyclone Harold on Vanuatu and Fiji in April 2020 is a case in point, and it is in Australia's interests to be able to respond rapidly and effectively in such circumstances. Fortunately, in the case of Harold, Australia was able to provide assistance via multiple flights of supplies to Vanuatu and Fiji by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) – including, in the case of Fiji, taking the opportunity to transport medical supplies to assist Fiji's preparations for an outbreak of COVID-19.

Defence has sought to proactively prepare regional partners for COVID-19 to boost resilience in these countries and minimise the scale of any response that may be required. This has included the delivery of crucial medical supplies to Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Fiji, and technical assistance to the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Palau, Tonga, Fiji, and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Defence has actively sought to maintain its network of partnerships all over the world, but especially in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific where an Australian response is both most likely to be required and where Australia has the greatest capacity to respond. This network is important to maintain situational awareness, to keep important relationships strong, and to continue to work as best as possible with regional governments to boost shared resilience and security across the region while this crisis is underway.

Defence has postured its in-country Defence Cooperation Program efforts to help partner nations plan, prepare and implement their own security response to COVID-19. Defence are doing this as part of the whole of government effort being led by the Head of Mission and in direct response to the security needs of our DCP partners. Defence is also looking to provide up to six months consumables and spare parts to participants in the Pacific Maritime Security Program, to support them to keep their Pacific Patrol Boats and Guardian Class Patrol Boats operational and enabling their maritime assets to support domestic COVID-19 responses.

More widely, Defence is sharing information and opportunities to cooperate on COVID-19 responses with other defence forces, particularly with partners such as Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States. Two ADF online COVID-19 training courses – COVID-19 Awareness and COVID-19 General Duties in a Health Environment – have been released for use by international partners and have been made available through posts including in the United States, South East Asia and the Pacific. These courses are between 30 and 60 minutes long and available as a free resource to international military and regional partners.

However, there have had to be adjustments to Defence's usually high-tempo pattern of cooperation with international partners in light of Australian Government or other host government restrictions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Essential cooperation on joint capabilities is being upheld. The Australian Government will consider requests for foreign



personnel to enter Australia on a case-by-case basis, and any agreed arrivals will be subject to Australian Border Force and state / territory government requirements, such as mandatory self-isolation.

Other international cooperation that is either deemed non-essential, requires capabilities needed elsewhere, is impractical given current restrictions, or presents too great a risk to Australian or host-country communities, has been postponed or cancelled. The list of cancelled engagement activity is large – two high-profile examples include Exercise Pitch Black, the RAAF's biennial capstone international engagement activity, and the annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour regional deployment. The maintenance of Defence's network of attaches and liaison officers will help to minimise the impact of this draw-down, and allow it to be reinstated when appropriate, once the pandemic has abated.

### ***Protecting Defence personnel, families and communities***

As the situation deteriorated globally, Defence acted immediately to ensure Defence minimised the burden on the civilian health system and implemented workplace policies in line with the progressively tighter restrictions put in place by government.

Defence made specific information on coronavirus available for Defence personnel through telephone help lines such as 1800-IMSICK, and a virtual information assistant or 'chat bot'.

All Joint Health Units developed and activated specific regional implementation arrangements in cooperation with public health units and hospitals, includes plans for surging inpatient capabilities. Health centres identified facilities and personnel for the triage and management of ADF members who may have been exposed to COVID-19 or who develop respiratory symptoms. ADF members can be assessed for COVID-19 at any of the ADF's health centres across Australia, including at 29 dedicated COVID-19 assessment stations at some locations.

Defence is in the process of establishing a SARs-COV-2 testing capability in collaboration with a civilian pathology laboratory using Defence personnel and equipment, and is also establishing a deployable SARS-COV-2 testing capability.

Workplace measures implemented by Defence to minimise the spread of COVID-19 included restricting the use of sporting fields and physical training equipment to training purposes only; the closure of gymnasiums and swimming pools; limiting of messes, canteens, cafes and bars to takeaway services only; the closure of all establishments to civilian visitors; and the closure of all areas used for outdoor gatherings, such as golf courses, BBQ areas, playgrounds and outdoor gymnasiums.

Defence also moved to adopt wide-scale social distancing measures, including by reducing the numbers of personnel at the workplace and facilitating remote working and work-from-home arrangements; minimising face-to-face meetings; restructuring teams to ensure contingencies were available; increased cleaning of Defence facilities, including the engagement of additional staff to perform non-routine cleaning tasks; postponing non-essential training and education; and repatriating over 230 non-essential personnel and their dependents deployed overseas. Arrangements have also been made to accommodate and support personnel in self-isolation.

As a result, Defence has had just 39 positive cases (as at 30 April 2020) in an organisation of around 100 000 personnel, many of whom are engaged in the community or continuing to carry out essential duties at Defence facilities.

Defence has refreshed its Business Continuity Plans to ensure it can re-assign resources to support critical government functions both within the Department and more broadly, and to ensure it is postured for recovery. To support this effort, some functions have had to be slowed or put on hold. These include activities that did not satisfy the Department of Health guidance, such as international government-to-government talks, and minimising posting and relocations of personnel and their families.

Rapid changes were required to enable Defence recruitment to continue. Defence Force Recruiting adopted a virtual recruiting process, with more than 2000 Australians having joined the ADF since December 2019.

This pandemic and the measures taken against it can have an impact on Defence families, especially in some situations where members are deployed or posted without their dependents. Defence is providing a range of support to its personnel and their families, and is adopting more flexible workforce policies.

Defence's e-communication platform, ForceNet, which is used to communicate internally and connect families with members, has seen an increase of 35 per cent in registered users, which is assisting in communicating up-to-date information with the Defence community.

Personnel policies have reflected Government and whole of APS guidance. For example, policy was developed and implemented to ensure non-essential ADF and APS personnel and their families who were posted overseas had the opportunity to return to Australia.

The Defence Community Organisation as well as the Defence Employee Assistance Program have used various communication channels to provide mental health and wellbeing support and to help personnel and their families adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Defence Family Helpline, and a range of practical support, including webinars, is also available to members and their dependents.

The delivery and reform of ADF transition support programs also remained a priority, with programs delivered virtually. ADF personnel who may have otherwise transitioned out of their Service are made aware of the current employment market, and are able to be held in place for a longer period if they wish to withdraw their request to transition.