

Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

- 5.1 The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) 84 Wing Detachment operates two Boeing 707 air-to-air refuelling aircraft from Manas International Airport, near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The deployment commenced in March 2002 and is scheduled to run for six months. The primary purpose of the visit to Kyrgyzstan, which took place on Thursday 26 July 2002, was to visit 84 Wing, although while in Bishkek the delegation leader and deputy leader also called on the Minister for Defence and officials from the Foreign Ministry.

Australia and Kyrgyzstan

- 5.2 Kyrgyzstan is a small, land-locked Central Asian country covering some 198,500 square kilometres. It is bordered by Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the south-west and China to the south and south-east. Kyrgyzstan's significance to the International Coalition Against Terrorism is its geographic proximity to Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan's willingness to support the Coalition and allow the basing of Coalition military aircraft inside its borders has led to the establishment of a significant Coalition air base at Manas International Airport. The base has been named GANCI Airbase in memory of Peter J Ganci, a New York firefighter who died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11.
- 5.3 Australia's relationship with Kyrgyzstan prior to September 11 was very modest. In 2000, Australia's exports to Kyrgyzstan totalled \$A592 000. Imports from Kyrgyzstan had a value of \$A756 000 for the same period.

There is no significant direct investment from Australia.¹ The deployment of RAAF personnel to the airbase at Manas has heightened the interest of both countries in one another.

- 5.4 To facilitate the deployment, a Status of Forces Agreement has been negotiated and signed by Kyrgyzstan and Australia. Such agreements are commonly negotiated between nations to establish conditions for the presence of visiting military forces and assets in another country. The terms of this agreement are broadly consistent with the terms Australia typically seeks in such agreements. The agreement provides that the Kyrgyz Republic shall treat deployed ADF personnel with due respect and shall take all appropriate steps to prevent any attack on the person, freedom or dignity of deployed personnel. It provides also, among other terms and conditions, that ADF personnel deployed in Kyrgyzstan:
- shall not be liable for any form of arrest or detention;
 - shall be immune from criminal jurisdiction and (in certain circumstances) from civil jurisdiction; and
 - shall be exempt from most taxes, duties and charges.²

Official calls in Bishkek

- 5.5 On behalf of the delegation, Senator Ferguson and Mr Brereton made calls on the Kyrgyz Deputy Minister of Defence, Major General Asilbek Ormokoyev and the Chief of the General Directorate of Politics in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Senator Ferguson and Mr Brereton were accompanied by the Australian Ambassador to Russia, His Excellency Mr Les Rowe, who is also accredited to Kyrgyzstan.
- 5.6 The Minister of Defence welcomed the Delegation's visit, saying that Australia and Kyrgyzstan were now partners in the fight against transnational terrorism. He reported that the Government of Kyrgyzstan had agreed to support the International Coalition Against Terrorism because fighters from the extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which posed a direct threat to Kyrgyzstan, had been trained in Al Qaida camps in Afghanistan. The Minister saw the elimination of terrorist camps and sanctuaries in Afghanistan as being a great victory with substantial benefits for Kyrgyzstan.

1 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Kyrgyzstan Country Brief*, September 2001.

2 Status of Forces Agreement between Australia and Kyrgyz Republic, National Interest Analysis, pp1-2, www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jsct/12march2002.htm (as at 27 September 2002)

5.7 Senator Ferguson and Mr Brereton were welcomed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Mr Kadyraliev Saktanbek Kadyralievich, the Chief of the General Directorate of Politics, and eight other senior officials from the Ministry. In a wide ranging discussion, the following key issues were raised by the officials:

- Kyrgyzstan's proximity to Afghanistan exposed the Kyrgyz Republic to direct threat during the Taliban regime - in 1999-2000 terrorist and criminal organisations based in Afghanistan had attempted to cross through Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan to smuggle weapons and drugs;
- after 20 years of war, it will take some time to achieve a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan, but striving for such a settlement is crucial for regional security;
- achieving a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan will allow the Kyrgyz Government to redirect its scarce resources from combating terrorism to building social infrastructure;
- there is a high level of community support in Bishkek and Manas for the presence of the Coalition air base in Kyrgyzstan – many locals are finding opportunities for work at the base or supplying goods and services to the Coalition forces;
- the Kyrgyz Government is keen to develop further its relations with Australia, in particular to promote Kyrgyzstan as a tourist destination (2001 was the Year of Tourism Development and 2002 has been declared to be the International Year of Mountains); and
- unemployment is a growing problem following the withdrawal of Soviet industries and the Government is endeavouring to promote temporary foreign worker schemes to help young people find work and support their families.

Visit to the Coalition Airbase at Manas

5.8 The delegation's visit to GANCI Airbase at Manas International Airport involved briefings from RAAF Group Captain Dave Richards, Coalition Air Operations Officer; Wing Commander Trent Breeze, Commander of the RAAF 84 Wing Detachment; and Brigadier General George Patrick, United States Air Force, the Coalition Commander at the base.

RAAF 84 Wing Detachment

- 5.9 Wing Commander Breeze briefed the Delegation on the nature of the 84 Wing deployment and operations. He began by noting that the operations from GANCI were combined Coalition operations in every sense, involving aircraft and troops from Australia, Denmark, France, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the United States.
- 5.10 Wing Commander Breeze outlined the critical role played by RAAF air-to-air refuelling aircraft in sustaining combat operations in and over Afghanistan. He indicated that the Coalition regularly operated between 50 and 60 air-to-air refuellers, increasing at peak operational times up to 100 refuellers. These aircraft helped sustain fighter and bomber coverage over Afghanistan. The distances are such that, without air-to-air refuelling, the fighters and bombers based at Manas would be unable to operate over Afghanistan.
- 5.11 He stressed that while Coalition Airborne Early Warning Aircraft operate over Afghanistan, flying conditions can be difficult and, at times, hostile.
- 5.12 Wing Commander Breeze also described the impressive serviceability rate being achieved by the Boeing 707 aircraft, largely as a result of the dedication and skill of the RAAF ground crews. The RAAF has flown 110 refuelling missions and on only one occasion has a mission been cancelled as a result of aircraft unserviceability. This is a serviceability rate well in excess of original expectations.
- 5.13 At the time of the visit, the two Australian aircraft had refuelled 530 fighters and bombers from the United States Navy, the United States Marine Corp and the French Air Force. By the completion of the deployment in September 2002, the RAAF aircraft and crew had offloaded more than 6 million pounds of fuel to more than 800 Coalition combat aircraft.³
- 5.14 Wing Commander Breeze explained that maintaining qualified and current crews in the lead up to and during the deployment had been a significant challenge for the RAAF. This had been further exacerbated by the detection of faults in the aircraft shortly before the deployment that required repair and took the aircraft off-line. In these circumstances having access to the level 5-flight simulator at RAAF Richmond was of crucial importance, enabling crews to prepare for the deployment.
- 5.15 Wing Commander Breeze also reported that, after some initial difficulty, a reliable equipment resupply chain had been established.

3 Defence Media Release, Air Force Personnel Home Safely from Kyrgyzstan Deployment, 29 September 2002.

The delegation receives a briefing at GANCI Airbase, Manas,
near Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan

Coalition Commander at GANCI Airbase

- 5.16 The key message conveyed by General Patrick was that Coalition air operations were working in a highly integrated and effective fashion. Coalition elements from eight different nations were working closely together in daily flight operations, with Group Captain Richards playing a key role in the coordination of these operations.
- 5.17 General Patrick noted also that Coalition deployments to Manas had begun only 7 months ago (in mid-December 2001) and that it was testament to the cooperative spirit of the coalition that GANCI Airbase had been transformed from a 'bare base' to an operational facility within 74 days. Since then, operations conducted from GANCI had ensured fighter coverage over Afghanistan 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- 5.18 General Patrick went on to outline the type of operations flown from GANCI, mentioning fighter and bomber operations, air to air refuelling, large transport into the theatre of operations, tactical airlift within the theatre, and combat search and rescue missions.
- 5.19 On a number of occasions during his briefing, General Patrick praised the professionalism of the RAAF contingent, noting that they had established an impressive reputation for the reliability and quality of their refuelling operations.

Tour of GANCI and meeting the troops

- 5.20 Following the formal briefings, the delegation toured the airbase, visiting the tented living accommodation, the recreation facilities, the flight-line, and the servicing and logistic areas. The tour included an on-ground inspection of a Boeing 707 refuelling aircraft, during which the flight crew described the sequence and conduct of a refuelling mission.
- 5.21 The delegation also met the servicemen and women of the 84 Wing Detachment over afternoon tea. It was clear that while keeping the tankers flying and conducting missions was an intense process, requiring long hours of work, they were enjoying the opportunity to display their skills in an operational environment. There were no major complaints and, after some initial concerns over mail, the connectivity with home was reported as good.

A member of the RAAF's 84 Wing Detachment at GANCI explaining the Boeing 707 air-to-air refuelling system to Graham Edwards MP

Kim Beazley MP, Warren Snowdon MP and Bruce Scott MP being briefed in the cockpit of one of the RAAF's Boeing 707 air-to-air refuelling aircraft.

A RAAF Boeing 707 refuelling a Mirage aircraft from the French Air Force over Afghanistan.

Conclusions and observations

5.22 The main observations and conclusions arising from the visit to Kyrgyzstan were as follows:

- the Government of Kyrgyzstan has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the War on Terrorism, having directly experienced the security threats posed by terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking;
- the Government and people of Kyrgyzstan have been friendly hosts to our deployed service personnel and are keen to use the opportunity to build closer economic, social and cultural relations between the two countries;
- the air operations run from GANCI Airbase are highly integrated, with eight nations (including Australia) involved in all operational elements – from the planning, conduct and management of operations, to the administration of the base;
- RAAF air-to-air refuelling operations contribute directly to the capacity of the Coalition air forces to operate over Afghanistan and provide essential air cover for ground operations; and
- the morale of RAAF personnel deployed to Kyrgyzstan is high. The commitment being shown is reflected in the extraordinarily high levels of aircraft serviceability and mission completion rates being maintained.