

Senate, Monday 21 October 2002

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator FERGUSON (South Australia) (4.05 p.m.) —I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Visit to Australian forces deployed to the international coalition against terrorism*. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator FERGUSON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I am delighted to present this report on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Senator Payne and I were the only two senators involved. Senator Payne is currently chairing a session on peacekeeping at the International Conference of Women in Policing, so she will be unable to speak to the report today but intends to at the first possible opportunity in the adjournment debate. The report reports on a visit undertaken in July this year by a delegation of nine members from the committee to the Australian Defence Force personnel deployed on active service in the Middle East and Central Asia as part of Australia's contribution to the international coalition against terrorism. The delegation travelled by Defence Force aircraft and met with personnel deployed at the Australian National Command Element in Kuwait, Royal Australian Navy personnel enforcing UN sanctions against Iraq in the Persian Gulf, Royal Australian Air Force personnel conducting air-to-air refuelling operations from Kyrgyzstan and forces from Special Air Service regiment conducting operations in Afghanistan.

The visit was part of a wider program of activities being undertaken by the committee to monitor Australia's ongoing commitment to the war on terrorism. Those members fortunate enough to participate in the visit now have a far more comprehensive understanding of the nature and the effectiveness of Australia's commitment than can be achieved by receiving briefings in Parliament House. This report is one of the ways in which we are seeking to make this experience available to a much wider audience. An equally important element of the visit was to demonstrate Australia's strong bipartisan support and the support of the Australian community for the Defence Force personnel deployed on these operations.

We were extremely impressed by the outstanding professionalism and dedication to duty displayed by our servicemen and servicewomen in demanding and at times hostile circumstances. They are performing with great distinction and have earned the respect and admiration of the international forces with whom they are working. All Australians should be immensely proud of their achievements and the contribution they are making to the success of the international coalition against terrorism. In our report, as well as describing the visit, we make a number of observations about Australia's forces commitment to the coalition. It was clear, for example, that each of the force elements deployed is making a highly relevant contribution and is displaying outstanding levels of professionalism and commitment.

The quality of the contribution is demonstrated by the extent to which Australian forces are directly engaged in the planning, conduct and coordination of operations. In Afghanistan, the special forces task group is fully integrated into the coalition effort and provides a niche capability built upon a unique mix of training, skills, tactics, temperament and equipment. In

the Persian Gulf not only are our ships operating at a high tempo but also tactical control of the whole Maritime Interception Force is currently being exercised by an Australian commander and his staff. In Kyrgyzstan, the RAAF crew and ground crews were, until their recent return to Australia, achieving remarkably high levels of aircraft serviceability and mission success. In addition, an Australian officer was intimately involved in operational planning and coordination as the coalition air operations officer.

We were also interested to learn more about the complex command and control arrangements in place for the ADF contribution to the coalition. Although not implying that there are significant failings in the command structure, we have concluded that elements of the existing structure warrant careful consideration. We will, through our Defence Subcommittee, further examine the effectiveness of these arrangements and any other arrangements developed for similar deployments in the future. One matter on which we have made recommendations is the issuing of awards to deployed personnel to recognise their service. Our first recommendation is that the government and the Department of Defence take concerted action to overcome the evident delays in issuing the Australian active service medal to those personnel entitled to receive it. Ideally, this medal should be awarded immediately upon the completion of a tour of duty. A second recommendation is that, given the warlike nature of this deployment, the Minister for Defence should consider issuing an Australian campaign medal to those Australian Defence Force personnel who have served in operations in support of the international coalition.

There is no doubt that the international coalition's current operational tempo has diminished, especially in Afghanistan. It is widely accepted that the initial phase of the operation has passed and that the priority now is to help the Afghan government establish effective control within its territory. The recent return of the RAAF deployment and the public debate about the possible recall of the special forces contingent are evidence of a new phase of operations. It may, however, be premature to expect the imminent return of all Australian deployed forces. Continued vigilance is required in Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda and Taliban forces from regrouping before the Afghan government is able to exert security control. Moreover, the work of the Maritime Interception Force in the Persian Gulf seems unlikely to wind down in view of ongoing debates in the United Nations about the enforcement of UN resolutions against Iraq.

Of course, the terrible bombing in Bali reminds us all that the fight against terrorism is far from over. Whatever the future holds, the delegation's visit was a remarkable opportunity to meet with the soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen of all ranks involved in the war on terrorism, to better understand the nature of the operations in which they are engaged and to appreciate the circumstances and environments in which they are operating. The war on terrorism is a just cause and every Australian serving in support of the international coalition does so with the goodwill, gratitude and absolute support of the Australian community.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge some of the ADF personnel who made our visit such a success: Brigadier Gary Bornholt, the commander of the Australian national contingent, who hosted our visit and was on hand throughout the visit to provide us with expert advice; Commander Mike Noonan, from the Royal Australian Navy, the brigadier's chief of staff, who played a central role in developing and delivering the visit program; Squadron Leader Paul Baskin and his colleagues at Headquarters, Australian Theatre, who helped to coordinate the program from the Australian end; and, last but not least, Lieutenant Colonel Roger Noble, the committee's defence adviser, whose advice and assistance from

beginning to end was invaluable, and we certainly appreciate the ongoing assistance that we receive from Lieutenant Colonel Roger Noble. Thank you to all of the abovementioned and also to the men and women of the ADF who received us warmly and briefed us professionally at every location, notwithstanding the fact that they were in the midst of a heavy operational schedule.

I would also like to place on record our appreciation for the secretary of the committee, Grant Harrison, who came with us on that visit and who was responsible, together with Lieutenant Colonel Noble, for putting together a program in a very short time, and we thank them for the work they did and the professional manner in which they conducted themselves. Particularly to Grant Harrison and the staff of the secretariat, we owe an ongoing thanks for not only the professional way in which they arranged for this visit to take place but also for their ongoing work in other aspects on the war on terrorism.

We visited the Middle East at a time when climatic conditions were at their worst. Every day we were in Kuwait it was over 53 degrees. We had tremendously high temperatures out on the Gulf during our nights on the Arunta and the Melbourne. The temperatures were not much cooler in Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. To see the conditions that our troops are working under during their rotation staggers us both in the manner in which they are conducting their day to day work in the heat and in the fact that they are so professional in everything that they have done. They are very highly regarded by other international forces, particularly by the joint commander of operations, Lieutenant General Dan McNeil from the United States Army. We had a meeting with him and he spoke to us of the high regard in which he held our SAS troops, who are currently serving in Afghanistan. This was a very worthwhile visit and one of the most valuable delegations that I have ever been on in my 10 years in this parliament. I commend the report.

Senator BARTLETT (Queensland—Leader of the Australian Democrats) (4.15 p.m.) —I would also like to speak to the report entitled *Visit to Australian forces deployed to the international coalition against terrorism* of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, of which I am currently the Democrats' representative. I wanted to speak to the report—regardless of not being able to participate in this delegation—because it is an important report in the context of a lot of the debate happening in Australia at the moment. It is predominantly a factual report. I am not saying that all the committee's other reports are not factual, but this report focuses particularly on the specifics of what is happening rather than drawing a lot of policy conclusions. It is useful to examine the report in terms of the nature and range of Australia's involvement in this region, particularly in the context of the current debate about the war on terrorism.

There was a noteworthy statement towards the end of the second chapter of the report about Australia's commitment to the war on terrorism. What has been specifically identified as part of our military contribution to the international coalition against terrorism includes the involvement of two Orion long-range maritime aircraft, an Australian special forces detachment, two Boeing 707 refuellers, a naval task group with an amphibious command ship and a frigate as escort, four FA18 strike aircraft and one frigate with embarked helicopter capability. It might not be something that could take over the world, but it is not an insignificant military contribution, given some of Australia's limitations in the overall resources available to it. At the end of chapter 2 about Australia's commitment to the war on terrorism the report states that, whilst the focus of the visit was to meet with the personnel currently deployed, it was conducted during a period of intense international and domestic

debate about the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, particularly the extent to which the regime is continuing to develop weapons of mass destruction and, if so, what action should be taken. The report also states that 'since the return of the delegation this debate has intensified'.

Of course, senators and members have participated in parliamentary debate on these matters. The important point to emphasise there is: how much does the international coalition against terrorism that Australia is a part of link into the Iraqi issue? Those links and those debates need to be had and that specific linkage needs to be made if the coalition government—the Prime Minister and the cabinet—is continuing to have Australia positioned as a supporter of the US approach..

Senator Ferguson —They are two different issues.

Senator BARTLETT —You say they are two different issues, and they are two different issues, but you specifically mention them in your report—and I think it is appropriate that you have because your visit took place during a period of intense international discussion. This report outlines the amount of Australian military commitment in the region, in a range of countries, and again I would say that it is worth reading for that purpose. I believe they are two different issues and that they need to be debated as two separate issues. That is why the Democrats are keen to ensure that any discussion about Iraq that we need to have is not blended in with the legitimate concern and great angst that the community currently has in relation to terrorism and its threat to Australia—which of course has been brought home so much more tragically in the last week or so. I do think we need to keep them separate, but we also need to acknowledge that there is already a significant Australian military commitment in this region in relation to the coalition against terrorism and what the implications would be for not just that military commitment but any extra military commitment we may wish to provide if we as a nation were to support any engagement against Saddam Hussein.

It is no secret, and I want to make it clear, that the view of the Democrats is that we should not be supporting any war with Iraq. But I also think that, regardless of what the view of the Democrats is, we need to be ensuring that the public debate is fully informed. The Democrat view alone is not going to determine whether or not we engage in a war against Iraq. What I am particularly keen to ensure is that the debate surrounding that question is fully informed, and that needs to include our current military involvement in the coalition against terrorism and, if we are going to be involved with Iraq, whether that will then be diverted or whether there will be additional resources. The issue, even in the context of the coalition against terrorism, is whether or not this involvement needs to be reconsidered, given the events in Bali in the last week. Leaving the question of Iraq to one side, do we now need to look at reorientating our resources? I am not putting forward a specific position on that, but I do think that that is part of the debate that has now shifted on another step, sadly, with what has happened in Bali.

I would like to draw attention to a couple of other things in the report. The range of areas in which that commitment is being implemented is interesting. The committee went to a number of places. I find it disappointing that I was not able to be part of this delegation for various reasons, because it does look like it would have been an incredibly valuable delegation for parliamentarians to be a part of. We often hear cheap shots—sometimes valid shots—taken at parliamentarians for overseas trips. Apart from the fact that the delegation had to engage in 53-degree heat, which would not have been pleasant, it is worth emphasising that those are the conditions that our personnel have to engage with every day. I think a couple of our cricketers found it a bit hard to do it two days in a row. Our personnel have to do it day after day. They might not be playing cricket, but I am sure they are still pretty difficult conditions for them.

This is a perfect example of an incredibly valuable delegation for parliamentarians to be involved in to get a real sense of what is happening, what it means in reality on the ground, also emphasising the value of engagement with some of these countries. It would be ideal if we could find ways of engaging with countries such as Kyrgyzstan other than through warlike situations or military engagements, but it is still worth noting, as this report does, the value of having a little bit more contact with a country like that, a country that historically we have not had many dealings with. All those sorts of links can be beneficial.

As the report outlines, the number of countries involved in the international coalition against terrorism is substantial—not all of them through military commitments. We need debate on what is and what is not appropriate in terms of the activities of that coalition, because some of its activities, quite frankly, the Democrats are concerned about. We, with I think everybody in this place and everyone in the Australian community, share a goal of working to eradicate or reduce the threat of terrorism, and that is why we need a debate as to the best way of doing that.

There are many countries involved in that coalition, as the report details. That in itself can be a way of looking to develop greater linkages, greater understanding across countries about our different ways of dealing with things, about how best to effectively address what is now the international, the globalised, problem of terrorism. In that sense, again, it is valuable to have these sorts of activities and to have parliamentarians link in to them.

These activities are worth while for our armed forces. Our armed forces do not get a say about where they are sent. They dedicate themselves to the service of our country, and they go where they are sent. The recommendation in this report that active service medals be provided more promptly is a positive one that I hope the government will take up. It is important to recognise the work that our armed forces are doing.

We, from all of our different political perspectives, need to debate what is appropriate use of military engagement and what is not—such as military engagement in Iraq, which the Democrats are strongly opposed to. As strongly as the Democrats oppose Australia's involvement in a war on Iraq, and as strongly as we will continue to campaign on that issue, that should not be seen as an attack on those Australian men and women who serve our country through our armed forces and who go where they are sent. They should always have our support. More particularly, they should have our support when they return as veterans of military engagement. There is plenty of room for improvement in that area as well. I commend the report and seek leave to continue my remarks later. Leave granted; debate adjourned.