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CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**Opening Statement
Additional Estimates Hearing
10 February 2015**

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Senators, three weeks ago, I was privileged to spend some time with the Australian men and women who are deployed on operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East Region.

As you are well aware, in late December, the Iraqi Forces struck a major blow against Daesh when they recaptured key territory in the city of Ramadi. The Iraqi's achieved this important operational breakthrough after months of heavy fighting in a complex urban environment - and Australians played a significant role in the Iraqi's success.

As the Australian-trained Iraqi Special Operations Force Brigade fought their way through Daesh-held territory, remotely-based members of our Special Operations Task Group provided advice and assistance, including critical joint terminal attack control.

Australian Special Operations Task Group advisors enabled more than 150 airstrikes during the 1st ISOF Brigade offensive, destroying around 50 Daesh fighting positions, 16 heavy machine guns and numerous vehicle-borne IEDs.

Soldiers from the Iraqi's 76th Brigade, who trained with Australian and New Zealand Army personnel at Taji Military Complex have occupied defensive positions around Ramadi since around July while elements of the Australian Air Task Group supported the Ramadi clearance operation with our F/A-18 Hornets striking vital Daesh fighting positions that were hampering the Iraqi Security Force's advance through the city.

Ramadi is a significant indicator of steady progress in Iraq. Daesh has lost an estimated 40 percent of its territory in Iraq and around 20 percent of the territory it previously held in Syria; and as US Secretary of State John Kerry told a counter ISLI meeting in Italy last week, the Coalition is *"closing in on full control of the Syria-Turkey border. We are hammering Daesh's heavy weapons, its training camps, its oil fields, supply routes, cache sites, and infrastructure"*. This is progress, but it is not the end-state and there is still a difficult fight ahead to defeat Daesh.

During my time in the Middle East I met with many of our people who are based at Camp Baird. I also visited Australian personnel in Afghanistan, deployed under

Operation Highroad to the NATO-led Resolute Support mission. This mission continues to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces, who now lead security operations across the country.

The recent addition of 20 Australian personnel as advisors at the Kabul Garrison Command Advisory Team and at Train, Advise, Assist Command-Air will take the number of ADF personnel deployed on Operation Highroad to around 270 people.

Senators, my time in theatre was good preparation for an important NATO meeting on the Resolute Support Mission which I attended alongside the 28 NATO Defence Chiefs.

We acknowledged the sacrifices made by the men and women from all countries since the Afghanistan campaign commenced and I reaffirmed Australia's commitment to the future security of Afghanistan.

All present agreed that 2015 was a difficult and challenging year for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. The overall security situation deteriorated in the face of a determined Taliban insurgency.

The Taliban's advances in some parts of the country were, to some extent, anticipated once the Afghan security forces took on full responsibility for security at the start of 2015. As a developing force, the Afghan security forces still need time to mature and develop their independent capacity to plan, lead and conduct operations.

However there were also unexpected developments that further eroded the security environment in 2015. These included military operations by Pakistan, which pushed militants back into Afghanistan and the admission that former Taliban leader Mullah Omar was dead. Both of which set back the reconciliation process.

During the NATO meeting I attended, Defence Chiefs acknowledged the local security forces' resilience and courage in combating the insurgency across the country. A number of outlying districts remain contested; however, the Afghan Government retains control of all major population centres including the Uruzgan capital, Tarin Kot.

We expect the insurgents to continue to test security forces in 2016, but the Afghans have demonstrated their willingness to fight and have successfully retaken most of the territory temporarily lost to the Taliban.

The events of over the past year have shown that Afghan security forces will need more time and assistance to develop as an independent force but it has also shown they are a force worth investing in.

To this end, NATO has indicated it will continue to stand alongside Afghan partners as they develop the necessary capabilities to stabilise the country. In December, NATO Foreign Ministers agreed to sustain the mission through 2016. They also committed to continue to review the mission in the months ahead. This will ensure that NATO responds to Afghan requirements, as they emerge.

The decision to sustain current NATO force levels throughout 2016 has taken the present security situation into account and the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission will focus on three key areas; combat air support and logistics, as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

During the first half of this year, NATO and partner countries, like Australia, will consider our post-2016 commitments in the lead up to the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July [2016]. These deliberations and the decisions that follow will be crucial to ensuring Afghanistan's long term security.

An important element of our counter-terrorism efforts is our maritime commitment to intercept and seize illegal narcotics used to fund terrorism. Since she commenced operations in September, HMAS *Melbourne* has detected and destroyed almost one tonne of illegal drugs taking the total of ADF seizures to more than five tonnes in two years. Melbourne will complete its mission tomorrow (11 Feb 16) when the ship's company hands over to the crew of HMAS Darwin as she in-chops.

Senators I know we tend to focus on those ADF members who are on operations whether that be the larger operations I've addressed, border protection or our smaller operations such as those in South Sudan, Egypt or Israel- but for the 2,500 personnel who are currently deployed, there are tens of thousands more in Australia working to support operations; preparing to deploy; on stand-by like the soldiers, sailors, airmen and men who were ready to respond event of a nature disaster over the Christmas-New Year period; or training to ensure the ADF is ready for what the future may hold. I understand that can, at times, seem like a thankless role but I acknowledge their efforts and the critical work they do to ensure the ADF is well prepared, rehearsed, ready and responsive.

Finally Chair, around 3pm, the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Angus Campbell, will leave the hearing to attend an official commitment. When he does, the Deputy Chief of Army, Major General Rick Burr will represent Army while General Campbell is absent.

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