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CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE**

**Opening Statement
Budget Estimates Hearing**

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*** Check against delivery***

Good morning Chair and Senators. I would like to begin this morning by recording my condolences to the family and friends of Corporal Scott Smith who was killed in action when an improvised explosive device detonated during a clearance operation in Uruzgan on the 21st of October 2012. Corporal Smith was a talented soldier who was highly respected by his peers in the Special Operations Engineer Regiment. There is no doubt his actions that day saved many other Australian lives and his dedication to duty was formally recognised on Australia Day when he received a posthumous Commendation for Gallantry.

Corporal Smith was one of more than a hundred Australian Defence Force members whose efforts were acknowledged on Australia Day but there are thousands more Defence personnel who are doing an outstanding job at home and on deployments around the world. Many of those who were recognised have been part of Australia's ongoing contribution to the mission in Afghanistan. Senators, in the four months since my last operational update to this Committee, we have continued to make tangible progress in the transition to Afghan National Security Forces in Uruzgan province. The four infantry Kandaks we have mentored since 2008 are now conducting independent operations and have assumed the lead for security in their respective areas. As a consequence, the ADF's composition in Afghanistan has shifted from a Mentoring Task Force of 680 personnel to a smaller 330 strong Advisory Task Force to coincide with the end of our mentoring efforts at the Kandak level. The last Australian Force elements have redeployed from the Patrol Bases and Forward Operating Bases in Uruzgan and are now permanently based at Multi National Base - Tarin Kot.

While these activities highlight our ongoing progress they do not signal the end of our combat operations in Uruzgan. Our Special Operations Task Group will continue to operate against the insurgency and the Advisory Task Force will also retain a combat-ready capability, but our main focus throughout 2013 will be at 4th Brigade Headquarters and the Provincial Operations Coordination Centre where the ADF will continue to advise and train the Afghan National Army' logistics, engineer and other combat support elements.

Senators, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the scale and significance of progress in Afghanistan when looking from a distance and from 'the outside' where we tend to apply our own western perceptions of 'normal'. This is further complicated when we

attempt to assess the scale and implications of the many serious challenges that the Afghan people still unquestionably face.

ISAF's assessment of progress in Afghanistan is founded on a comprehensive 11 year engagement with the Afghans and a 'real world' understanding of the people, their history, their aspirations, their concerns and the enduring purpose of our commitment. Significant progress has been made which has provided the Afghans with the opportunity and capacity to manage their own future and to assist the international community in defeating and deterring threats emanating from Afghanistan.

These conclusions are based on four key indicators.

First is the trans-national terrorist threat. The al Qa'eda threat has been confronted, reduced and largely neutralised in Afghanistan. This task commenced in 2001 and it has required an ongoing, collaborative international effort. This has been a long-term combined fight that has required close cooperation with the Afghans to ensure the threat is identified, relentlessly pursued, and systematically degraded. With international assistance, the Afghans have steadily grown the organisations, knowledge and institutions necessary to take on and counter this threat linked with broader multinational counter terrorist efforts.

Second, is the state of the insurgency. The Taliban are resilient but their narrative and key messages have less resonance with the Afghan people today than ever before. Regular nation wide surveys show the majority of Afghans, including the southern Pashtuns, do not want the Taliban to return to power. The Taliban are increasingly fighting Afghans on Afghan soil and the senior insurgent leadership now operates largely from outside Afghanistan. While they retain the capacity to conduct occasional and spectacular attacks their military options are limited. They increasingly rely on terror tactics such as insider attacks, improvised explosive devices and the use of suicide bombers to exert their influence.

The third key indicator is the Afghan National Security Forces' leadership of security operations. Afghan Security Forces are now leading more than 80 percent of operations countrywide. The 2013 campaign plan is Afghan planned and will be Afghan executed. The Afghan National Army is recruited and will be fully fielded in 2013 and they will continue to operate in close collaboration with the other security arms, principally the Police and National Directorate of Security. Afghanistan has a very good and active Special Forces component. The ministerial and institutional management of the security force continues to evolve and grow with direction, execution and oversight now in Afghan hands. The ANSF is now a force able to confront and defeat the insurgents increasingly in its own right.

Progress is not limited to the military sphere. For example, Special Afghan police units are increasingly effective against drug trafficking networks in cooperation with a variety of international agencies. The Australian contribution in Uruzgan reflects the national level development and growth. Many challenges remain, including higher level command and control and logistics but it is a fact that the Afghans have lead carriage and responsibility for their security and this has the strong support of the Afghan people.

This brings me to the final indicator - population perceptions. Throughout 2012, nation wide surveys identified that security is no longer the average Afghan's primary concern. Basic services, such as power and roads, employment opportunities and corruption are now the top concerns. It is clear that the path ahead will require an Afghan political solution which can only be designed, agreed and implemented by Afghans and on an Afghan timeline.

Senators, the ISAF global coalition effort in Afghanistan has provided the time, space and opportunity to build and field an Afghan National Security Force and to establish the institutional building blocks that provide the foundation for a new Nation. The ADF has made a significant contribution in Uruzgan. This progress is demonstrated in the Afghans assumption of leadership and responsibility in the province. When an Afghan National Army soldier was injured in a motor vehicle accident recently, the ANA's 4th Brigade provided initial treatment at the scene and evacuated the injured soldier to a garrison health facility without coalition assistance. This illustrates how the military effort is changing to support and training assistance which will extend beyond 2014.

At this point I would like to acknowledge outgoing ISAF Commander, General John Allen, who will soon take up his new appointment as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe after 19 months heading the coalition mission in Afghanistan. General Allen is admired for his diplomacy as much as his military leadership and I would like to thank him for the support and friendship he has shown to Australian Forces during his tenure. I look forward to working with General Joseph Dunford who assumed Command this week. General Dunford faces the challenging task of steering Coalition and Afghan forces through transition at a time when international support to Afghanistan remains critical to bolstering and sustaining the confidence and hopes of the Afghan people.

As transition progresses our role in Afghanistan will continue to change. We will see infrastructure, equipment and other assets that are no longer required to support our mission returning to Australia. The ADF has developed an extensive footprint within Afghanistan over the past 10 years; redeploying that infrastructure is an enormous logistic task so additional specialist personnel will be deployed throughout 2013 to assist. This means the total number of ADF personnel deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations will remain around the current average of 1550 people until the end of the year. I understand there is a great deal of public interest in knowing when Australia's operations in Afghanistan will begin to wind down. The first significant decrease in the number of ADF personnel in Afghanistan will coincide with the end of transition in Uruzgan. Based on our current assessments, transition will be complete and the majority of ADF personnel will be withdrawn from Uruzgan by the end of the year.

Closer to home, two operations are close to completion. For the past 13 years Australian troops have been deployed in Timor-Leste. From the early days of the International Force for East Timor through to the International Stabilisation Force and the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste, our mission was to assist the Timorese Government to maintain a secure and stable environment while the fledgling nation

state matured into a fully functioning democracy. Following the successful national elections in 2012, the ADF began to drawdown personnel and equipment ahead of the UN Mission's conclusion on the 31st of December. Approximately 60 ADF personnel remain in Timor-Leste as part of Operation ASTUTE and I expect the withdrawal to be completed during the first quarter of 2013. In addition, 25 military specialists continue to train and mentor the Timor-Leste Defence Force under the Defence Cooperation Program. Their focus is on increasing the indigenous capacity in medical and infantry skills, logistics, maritime security, engineering and governance. Australia has committed to continuing the Defence Cooperation Program in Timor-Leste once the International Security Force mission is complete.

In the Solomon Islands, it is our intent to maintain an enduring Defence Cooperation Program once the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands or RAMSI effort concludes. Continued stability has allowed us to begin planning for our withdrawal. Defence is currently working with RAMSI, contributing nations (New Zealand, PNG and Tonga) and Australian Government agencies to implement a transition strategy throughout 2013 that is sympathetic to the security environment. The ADF will also maintain an '*over the horizon*' response capability that ensures we are prepared to redeploy to the Solomon Islands at short notice if the security situation deteriorates rapidly or unexpectedly.

In parallel with these overseas operations, Defence has continued to contribute Australia's border protection operations and over the summer, the ADF has provided assistance to Fiji, Samoa and Solomon Islands and to flood and fire affected communities in Queensland, Tasmania, New South Wales and Western Australia. The positive response on social media from grateful Australians was overwhelming.

At the height of the flood emergency in Queensland, four Blackhawk helicopters and their crews airlifted more than 260 people including 10 stretcher-bound passengers while an Air Force C-130J Hercules crew and specialist aero-medical personnel evacuated 90 patients from Bundaberg Hospital to Brisbane. As the waters began to recede, the 200 strong Emergency Support Force (ESF) was deployed from Enoggera to northern Queensland to help. The team included Army electricians, plumbers, carpenters and combat engineers who assisted local authorities to restore basic utilities and infrastructure. Members of the ESF also worked shoulder to shoulder with the local community to clean up after the flood. They removed water damaged medical equipment from Bundaberg Hospital and stripped sodden carpets from the local state school. They cleared vehicles and debris to reopen main roads and brought fresh drinking water and supplies to areas cut off by floodwaters. Air Force flew more than a dozen sorties in support of Operation Queensland Flood Assist II carrying approximately 77 tones of equipment.

Personnel from the Brisbane based 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment (2 CER) designed and built a temporary bridge to re-open the vital heavy vehicle link between North and South Bundaberg. When the job was done, the soldiers took on members of the Queensland Fire Service in a 20/20 cricket match, raising 17 thousand dollars for the Red Cross Flood Appeal.

During the bushfire emergency in New South Wales the Naval Air Station in Nowra acted as a base for Rural Fire Service and civilian aircraft being used to fight the fires.

HMAS Albatross assisted with aircraft refuelling and provided a base for mission planning. HMAS Albatross and RAAF Wagga also provided accommodation and meals for NSW fire fighters. In Tasmania, Regular and Reserve Army and Air Force personnel worked with local authorities to ensure houses were safe for residents to return. Air Force also transported generators from RAAF Amberley to Hobart to restore power to fire ravaged communities. In Western Australia over the weekend RAAF Base Pearce supplied water and access for civilian aircraft.

I think that these activities reflect an ADF that is from the Australian community and readily identifies with it.

Senators, I have just spoken about one aspect of ADF culture. Let me turn to another. You will be aware that on the 26th of November last year I issued an apology to those who have suffered sexual, physical or mental abuse while serving in the ADF. As the Chief of the Defence Force I believe it is my responsibility to lead the ADF in assisting the Government to implement the processes that it has put in place to respond to the DLA Piper Report. Together with the ADF's senior leadership, I am committed to ensuring we provide a fair, just and inclusive work environment. I have given my personal undertaking to endeavour strenuously to defend the right of all ADF members to serve in an environment free from abusive behaviour of any kind.

Defence is working with the Honourable Len Roberts-Smith and the Defence Abuse Review Task Force. To date, we have established protocols and commenced the transfer of Defence records requested by the Task Force. We will continue to cooperate fully as the Task Force undertakes this important body of work.

That said, it is important to note that when media organisations seek information from Defence about individual persons, investigations or inquiries which may be before the Task Force, there are a number of restrictions that prevent Defence from disclosing specific information. In addition to provisions of the Privacy Act 1988, Defence, like the media, is unable to comment on matters where the information has the potential to cause a miscarriage of justice. Defence tries to be as open and transparent as possible, whilst respecting the rights of individuals and the legal limits concerning disclosure of information. It is important that we allow the Task Force to conduct its work without prejudice.

Finally it is almost 12 months since the *Pathway to Change* strategy was released in response to the suite of reviews. I am pleased to report that we are making progress. Of the 160 recommendations, 41 are complete and another 115 are in progress. The four remaining recommendations will commence as other related recommendations mature. We recognise change takes time and the challenge over the next 12 months is to maintain the momentum so that we continue to build a culture that gives confidence to the Australian people and a work force that reflects the community it serves.

Since the first of January, women who are already serving in the ADF have been able to apply to become clearance divers, mine warfare and clearance diving officers in the Navy; airfield defence guards and ground defence officers in the Air Force; and they can apply to join the infantry and armoured corps, explosive ordnance disposal and combat engineer squadrons in the Army. Next month Defence will host the inaugural Gender in Defence and Security Leadership Conference. Senior government, military

and business representatives from the US, the UK, Canada and New Zealand will share their experiences and discuss the issues challenging gender equity.

The operational update I have provided this morning shows why our Defence Force personnel are renowned not only for their skill and professionalism but for their resilience and ability to overcome adversity. These are the qualities I see in the men and women of the Australian Defence Force and in the families who support them. They are also the qualities that reinforce my optimism about the future of our organisation.