

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan

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Submission by: **Veteran Support Force LTD.**

By email: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Veteran Support Force (VSF) is a Non-for profit charity which seeks to provide support to Veterans and Families during the conduct of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. Within the last few months, this has required immense time and effort to support those impacted by the capitulation of Afghanistan.

This submission is made in accompaniment to extensive PDF attachments detailing the correspondence of cases that VSF has and is supporting, relevant to the Terms of Reference to the senate enquiry relating to Australia's twenty-year military, and diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan. These attachments include personal information that **MUST NOT** be published publicly. VSF has attained the permission of those who have provided this information, for it to be included within this submission to the Senate Committee. All individuals identifiable within the attached documents have expressed that they are agreeable to be directly contacted by the Senate Committee. Of note, some of these stories are harrowing and any engagement with these individuals and families in distress needs to be done so in a trauma informed and supported manner.

Over the past 3 months - in leading up to, during and post the withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan, Heston Russell has spoken out publicly, on behalf of VSF, about our governments failings to the men, women and their families who assisted our efforts in Afghanistan being, and have been left behind. This has included sending extensive communications with the designated contact details including the afghanlee@defence.gov.au and minister@defence.gov.au emails, without response.

This has also been the experience of the majority of Australian Citizens that we have directed to this process, the only process 'communicated' to the Australian public - so poorly

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communicated that it requires searching and was not included in any of the Government's many public press conferences.

The Managing Director of VSF, Heston Russell, has constantly fielding emails, text and social media messages from helpless afghanistan civilians and Australian citizens who managed to find him on social media to seek support. Heston and VSF as an organisation were only able to discover the process for submitting to the afghan.lee@defence.gov.au email after this information was provided by [REDACTED]. In fact, the [REDACTED] was the only member of the current government to respond and action, or at least acknowledge any of our emails detailing the dire support needed for those Australian Citizens, their families, or those who supported our forces in Afghanistan. [REDACTED] asked Heston Russell to send him the information, and [REDACTED] then printed it off and took it to the Home Affairs / Foreign Affairs relevant Ministers.

This insight speaks to the inadequacy of government planning to facilitate a safe passage, timely paperwork and background checks for the members of the community left behind, let alone the inadequacies of stepping up the required operational communications and engagement capability to meet, let alone respect, the requirements of this crisis and those who have been further traumatised by these gross procedural failings.

Through our ongoing commitment and continued forwarding of these pleas for help to the government and seeking any updates after weeks on end, we have been shocked to not even receive a single response. This was until receiving the attached generic letter dated 01 October, nearly SIX weeks after our first correspondence. Through such abysmal communication management processes, the government has actively contributed to neglecting and inflicting greater hardship on those in crisis, and our volunteer organisation that has been left to support those in trauma. Fielding their further frustrations and now anger at being met with such a deaf ear from the government. The attached correspondence highlights this in great detail (see *Erina Case*) where a former Afghan Mother and now Australian Citizen details the misarrriage of her twins and degeneration into suicidal behaviour due to receiving no response or ANY communications, for weeks on end, from anyone within the responsible government

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departments, despite her and her family providing all the information requirements and in great detail.

Another member who reached out for help was a [REDACTED] who showed extreme concern for his loved ones who had also worked with the Australian Defence Force and had now been contacted by the Taliban in a threatening manner. Upon receiving this information providing him the correct requirements in line with the DFAT regulations his urgent concerns again went unheard when passed to those who were meant to help.

These are just two specific cases of people and families that have been neglected by our failed withdrawal, and further traumatised by our governments failed responses. VSF has continued to seek and provide all the required information to support these cases including the correct passport information, proof of identity and character references with either photo evidence proof of their work with either the ADF or Australian Companies contracted to the ADF whilst on operations in Afghanistan.

Noting my own experiences on operations, my understanding for the importance of and the vitalness of our Afghanistan counterparts or any counterparts assisting with our global war on terror I am disappointed and appalled that correspondence to DFAT for assisting those who risk their lives for us fall on deaf ears. Without mentioning the lack of planning for what was a well known risky withdrawal strategy from our country's greatest apparent think tanks the response to letters and pleas for help from people like [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] do not show veterans like myself, nor the greater public that they can trust their own government if ever they were to be in a life threatening situation overseas.

During this process we have been approached by and connected with other Veterans who have similarly been contacted by former Afghan colleagues, including interpreters and security staff they worked alongside during previous deployments. VSF is and will continue to assist them, provide information and we are now directing them to other avenues for assistance, including former US colleagues in order to support alternative evacuation means. This is the sad reality of our inability to achieve action from our own government, that we have had to resort to foreign support for those that we have a moral obligation to, including families of Australian Citizens.

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Again, VSF is a Veteran volunteer charity organisation. We have submitted official proposals and requests for financial support from the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, without response also.

Our withdrawal from and the subsequent collapse of Afghanistan is a period of crisis that has devastated so many. However, the manner in which our people, those we have a moral obligation to, and those Australian Citizens who have reached out for support, have been neglected and further traumatised by the incompetence or avoidance of the respective government departments is an absolute stain on our national reputation. While the Senate Committee Inquiry indeed trawls through this, can we again please ask for concurrent priority to be placed to commit Commonwealth resources to contact and support the individuals and families identified in the attached documentation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry. Our organisation stands ready to provide any further information or support in clarifying any of the information provided within or attached to this submission at any time.

Please see below for the relevant contact details.

Yours in Service,



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