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Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Submitted to: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan.

The APS is the peak professional body for psychology in Australia, representing over 27,000 members nationally. For approximately 80 years, the APS has played a central role in establishing standards to ensure the quality and safety of mental health care in Australia. In this role, it is responsible for promoting excellence and ethical practice in the science, education and practice of psychology as the key discipline for reducing the burden of mental ill-health and increasing the wellbeing of all Australians.

Many of our members deliver psychological services to current and ex-serving military personnel. This submission is based on feedback sought from these members. It addresses the Inquiry's terms of reference where relevant to psychology and member feedback.

The APS would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for allowing us additional time to make a submission to the Inquiry, and trust that our comments are helpful. We look forward to seeing the Government's response to the committee's report and recommendations.

If you require any further information, please contact me at my office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at z.burgess@psychology.org.au.

Kind regards

Dr Zena Burgess FAPS FAICD
Chief Executive Officer

Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan

This submission by the APS to the Inquiry into Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan is based on feedback sought from our members. It addresses the Inquiry's terms of reference where relevant to psychology and member feedback.

Term of Reference a. Australia's twenty-year military, diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan, with reference to:

iii. the costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

The APS believes that the costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan are immense and will continue to be felt by the Australian community for some time. We emphasise that these costs pertain, not only to the considerable financial and material expense of Australia's mission in Afghanistan, but, above all, to the human cost of what has occurred.

In terms of that human cost, the APS considers that there are potentially four groups of people who have been placed at short and long term risk by the abrupt cessation of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan; namely:

(a) Australian citizens, visa holders, and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, where they remain in Afghanistan – whose lives have potentially been placed in peril by the suddenness of the Government's action.

(b) Members of Australia's military community and their families (and, particularly for those individuals who were personally involved as members of the Australian defence force in "Operation Enduring Freedom") - who are highly likely to have experienced significant post-mission psychological distress due to Australia's abrupt departure from Afghanistan; thereby raising the possibility they will experience some mental ill-health or increase in mental ill-health as a consequence.

(c) Afghan immigrants living in Australia - who are unable to visit their family who remain in Afghanistan - and who may be experiencing concern about their family's ongoing welfare and safety, and

(d) The Australian community itself - members of which may have experienced considerable disappointment due to the possible harm to the Nation's reputation as a western democracy. A loss of trust in the role of Government, their political process and leaders, may have been experienced as a result of the actions taken.

Term of reference c. how the Australian Government should respond to recent developments in Afghanistan in order to:

iii. extend immediate mental health support to Australian defence force personnel and veterans while the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide remains ongoing

The APS is unequivocal in its view that the Australian Government must respond urgently to the mental health support needs of current and ex-serving Australian defence force personnel and their families. That assistance needs to be made available, without limit, via public, NGO and private-sector services.

Given the internecine and traumatising nature of the events that have occurred in the guerrilla warfare style conflict of the Afghanistan crisis (e.g., through the horror created by the Taliban in its use of suicide bombers), it is important that the Government provides appropriate and high quality evidenced-based psychiatric and psychological care, support and interventions, to those affected.

The APS would be pleased to partner with the Government to develop a systematic quality assurance program for the services being provided to Australian defence force personnel and veterans.

iv. protect Australian citizens, visa holders, and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, where they remain in Afghanistan

The reality is that there are many Afghans who supported Australia in its military intervention and would now like to emigrate from Afghanistan, but who are not able to. Unless Australia and other western nations who were involved in the Afghanistan conflict offer to repatriate those so-affected Afghans, most will not be able to exit the country. Unfortunately, many will be subject to avoidable maltreatment and cruelty as a result.

In the face of the humanitarian crisis that is likely to occur in Afghanistan, the APS implores the Federal Government to increase Australia's refugee intake. We believe there are moral, humanitarian and economic grounds specifically related to the "Afghanistan crisis" for doing so. In addition, the APS believes it would be highly commendable for the Australian Government to assist not only Afghan refugees to settle in Australia, but also visa holders, and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, to settle in other similar western and Commonwealth nations. This might take various forms, including quarantining and practical (consular) assistance.

The APS is adamant that where Afghans are accepted into Australia, they must be given every assistance available. As stated above in relation to the needs of current and ex-serving military personnel and their families, given the internecine and extremely traumatising nature of the events that have occurred in the conflict in Afghanistan, it is important that the Government provides appropriate psychiatric and psychological care and support to all such refugees. Again, that care and support must be of the highest standard of evidence-based practice.

As the most recent country where Australia has provided military intervention, it is important that Afghanistan nationals are not subject to the same errors associated with past interventions in other places. It is vital that the Australian Government provide assistance to as many Afghans as possible by repatriating them to countries where they are not treated with the same hostility they are likely to experience under the new government in their country.

In summary

The APS believes that now is the time for the Australian Government to act to address any potential harm that may arise for current and ex-serving personnel, their families, and Afghan refugees, from the current crisis. We again thank the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and would like to reinforce our readiness to assist the government in their efforts to manage the potential psychological fall-out associated with Australia's engagement in Afghanistan.