

Senator Mark Bishop

Peacekeeping

Mr Deputy President, I rise on the adjournment tonight to pay tribute to those in our defence forces, police and civilians who have in the past served in Australian peacekeeping forces.

It is also salutary to note that the awful events of the last few days have served as a trigger to consider not just the thrust of our foreign policy, but also our approach to defence in the region, our level of preparedness, the appropriate logistical support - and most importantly the type of deployment the ADF might be faced with.

Peacekeeping is not a new phenomenon of course, but it is one which has become prominent internationally due what I believe has been the relative success of the United Nations in fulfilling its paramount charter in securing peace in the world. That is a qualified statement but is one I make advisedly given the enormous political, logistic and financial difficulties entailed.

Today this is a headline issue, and as I said in the Senate last sittings on the debate on the crisis on Iraq, the role of the UN must be recognised, as must the commitment of member nations to support it.

However, we also know that peacekeeping for the UN is very much a vexed question, with an active debate still current within the world community about the nature of such interventions, and the ability of the UN to sustain them.

I don't wish to set out that debate here today, but simply to say that whatever the policy and the pro's and con's of anyone decision, at the end of the day the purpose of any involvement will affect the way it is managed. That in turn comes back to the understanding we have in the event that Australia participates, and to the way our process and systems of deployment adequately reflect our responsibility for the personnel affected.

The stimulus for peace keeping inevitably comes not from disagreements between sovereign states, but from historical grievances including civil wars. Inevitably such circumstances involve economies in a state of collapse, and fragile agreements for peace - and sometimes no such agreements at all.

In some circumstances peacekeeping forces can in fact do little to secure or maintain peace, with the very difficult role being to protect humanitarian aid - and all this inevitably being driven by a genuine need for peace, but in very uncertain circumstances.

These issues are very important because behind every decision to join the UN there are subsequent decisions of what forces we commit, what skills are provided, what the

conditions of service might be reasonable from what is known - and most importantly what the operational orders should be.

One thing does seem to be certain, and that is that circumstances are often not well known, and inevitably change very quickly.

Salutary examples of this point can be seen in the deployments to Somalia and Rwanda where peace had not been established beforehand - and say Timor which thankfully did not develop as some may have expected at the time.

As a member of the UN, Australia's record is impeccable, and it is important to recognise that since its inception, we have been part of a large number of peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the UN - excluding Korea and the Gulf, which as we know were warlike deployments to secure peace rather than maintain it.

For the record it is worth recording some of the UN deployments we have been part of, because I suspect that many Australians would not be fully aware of them. It is also a reminder of the extent to which we can indeed consider ourselves to be responsible and independent in our commitment to the UN.

Commencing in 1947, Australia has participated in a wide range of peacekeeping activities including the Balkans, India and Pakistan, Indonesia, the Congo, the Yemen, Cyprus, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, Egypt and Israel, Iran/Iraq, Cambodia, Namibia, the Eastern Sahara, Mozambique, Bougainville and Haiti.

While it is difficult to get a precise number, it is recorded that Australia has participated in 57 operations overseas since the end of WW 2, both as part of UN resolutions or as part of multilateral forces.

Currently for example, we are participants in activity still, in Malaysia, Cyprus, the Sinai and the Middle East as part of very long standing UN commitments.

More recently we have committed to Timor, Bougainville, the Solomon Islands and the War on Terror. Estimates of the number of people involved are as high as 60 000 - and all that is commensurate with the nature of the modern defence task.

Some, such as Cyprus have been ongoing since 1947, and may entail police and civilian personnel. Others are more short term, and as a reflection of the diversity of circumstances which prompted the intervention, conditions experienced by individuals are also very wide. Categorising them according to whether they are likely to be "hazardous" or "non hazardous" is therefore very difficult.

The authority under which these deployments are managed is important, but the simple fact is that ADF personnel went and did their duty. But what irks some, particularly peacekeepers, is the inconsistency by which all these deployments have been treated with respect to coverage by the Veterans' Entitlements Act.

Here I make special reference to the submission to the Review of Veterans' Entitlements chaired by Justice Clarke, by the Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association dated 2 April 2002.

I specifically make no comment on the merits of the well argued case in this submission for more appropriate treatment of peacekeeping missions under the Veterans' Entitlement Act, but it is clearly evident that flowing from the wide diversity of conditions and purposes of past peacekeeping deployments, that the existing descriptors of risk are still at issue.

What is also clear is that what conditions may have been anticipated often turn out to be different, thus creating pressure for retrospective reclassification. Hence the terms of reference for the Review, whereby several other groups also believe that their service has been inadequately classified for the purposes of the VEA.

This raises the subject I have spoken in the Senate about previously, namely the difficulty in rating deployments overseas according to some standard of risk, some of which do not eventuate to the degree anticipated - for example in East Timor - and others such as Somalia where it is often said that the risk of death or serious injury turned out to be very high.

It is also unhelpful that we have two compensation schemes for the military with quite different benefits and with unfavourable comparisons frequently being made. As I have also observed in this place, hence the constant pressure from those seeking to have their service retrospectively covered by the Veterans' Entitlement Act which has more generous standard of proof and a number of other advantages.

This is very unfortunate and distracting from the main game which ought to be about achieving fairer and more consistent benefits and standards of care.

Indeed, if there is to be any satisfactory outcome from the Clarke Review, it ought to be a clear statement of recommended policy for the future as to how distinctions might be drawn between risks which are life threatening to the majority, those which entail some risk of physical harm, those which contain significant stress, and those which simply entail hard living conditions.

Then it would be useful to have advice as to the appropriate response by Government i.e. whether differential levels of compensation can continue to be viable, or whether there are other means of recognising those elements. Certainly the status quo is not a satisfactory option.

All those who served on these missions did so proudly and often with distinction. Their efforts did help to make the world a safer place. This includes both members of the ADF and Australian police forces.

The conditions of their service at times were difficult, and like all deployments overseas saw separation from loved ones for protracted periods. At times there were episodes involving some danger, though it is fair to say that fortunately in most cases, serious risk to life was avoided.

What is also a bone of contention has been the recognition accorded, and hence I am sure that all Senators will be aware of the representations which have been made by the Australian Younger Veteran Coalition and others, seeking to have medals or certificates of appreciation awarded.

This coalition by the way, includes the Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Association, the Australian Gulf War Association, and the Australian Gulf War Veterans and Peacekeepers Association of W A.

It is pleasing therefore to see that at last the Government has responded by way of its "Saluting their Service" Program, that certificates are to be made available for Gulf War veterans and peacekeepers.

We do however need urgent information on which deployments will attract the certificate, because just as night follows day, someone will be left out and the whole whirlpool will start spinning again

It is also to be hoped that the Clarke Review also sheds some light on the fundamental issues at the heart of military compensation and that the rules and definitions on entitlements are clarified once and for all.

Mr Deputy President, as I have said, issues of perceived anomalies and alleged injustice in the provision of benefits to veterans as a result of definitions and assessments of risk continue to bedevil us, but there is no excuse with respect to recognition of past contribution.

Thank you very much.