

No US request for more troops from Australia

The Minister for Defence, Mr Joel Fitzgibbon, and his United States counterpart, Secretary of Defence Dr Robert Gates, met in Krakow, Poland on February 20 to discuss the future of Afghanistan and other bilateral issues.

Afterwards he emphasised in statements on radio and television that the subject of Australia's providing more troops had not been raised. He reiterated Australia's commitment to Afghanistan and called, when he spoke at the plenary session of the NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) defence ministers' meeting for better coordination of civil and military components of the mission.

Mr Fitzgibbon and Dr Gates also discussed NATO's long-term strategy for Afghanistan, particularly the influx of US troops to occur in 2009.

Mr Fitzgibbon met a number of other key ISAF counterparts in the course of his visit.

They included the Dutch Minister of Defence, Eimert van Middelkoop; the Afghan Minister for Defence, General Abdul Rahim Wardak; the Canadian Minister of Defence, Peter MacKay; and the UK Secretary of State for Defence, John Hutton.

HMAS Sydney II loss inquiry begins

Public hearings of the Commission of Inquiry into the loss of HMAS Sydney II were scheduled for March 5 and 6 in Brisbane.

The President of the Commission, Terence Cole AO RFD QC, convened a public hearing of the inquiry, during which testimony was presented by members of the public and independent researchers.

More hearings were planned for March in Sydney and proceedings can be confirmed and advertised on the Defence Sydney II web site: www.defence.gov.au/sydneyii

Voyager claim still unsettled after 45 years

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, asked Australians to take a moment on February 10 to acknowledge the 45th anniversary of Australia's greatest peace-time military tragedy, the HMAS Voyager disaster.

For many, though, it has been an enduring tragedy of seeking compensation.

Last year — 44 years after the collision — all but one of the remaining claims arising from the tragedy had been resolved by the Federal Government. Efforts to resolve the single outstanding claim are continuing.

Mr Griffin said 82 lives had been lost when the Voyager and HMAS Melbourne collided off the south-east coast of Australia in 1964.

"On 10 February 1964, Melbourne, an aircraft carrier, and Voyager, a Daring-class Destroyer, took part in training exercises off the coast of Jervis Bay, south east of Sydney," he said.

"At 8.56 pm, while manoeuvring

Support for veterans in Qld floods

The Department of Veterans' Affairs' Deputy Commissioner in Queensland, Alison Stanley, has encouraged veterans affected by the floods in Queensland to contact the department for information on how to access support and services. Ms Stanley said the Department of Veterans' Affairs was available to support veterans and their families affected by the disaster.

"The extensive and prolonged flooding across Queensland has affected the lives and property of many Queenslanders including veterans and their families," she said. "Many in the veteran community rely on DVA for advice and for those in need there is immediate support available."

People receiving DVA payments and concerned about those payments should call the department to discuss their circumstances. Regional callers could ring 1800 555 254 for the price of a local call. Veterans who had their property insured with Defence Service Homes Insurance and whose property had been affected by the floods were encouraged to contact their local customer service officer on 1300 552 662 to discuss the assistance available under their policies.

Many policy holders, particularly in the Ingham area, were yet to return to their properties and customer service officers expected to receive calls after the flood waters finally receded.

DVA has a Veterans' Affairs Network office in Townsville and veterans can call it on 1300 55 1918.

Alternatively, DVA has an agency arrangement with Centrelink in



COMBINED EFFORT: As Veterans' Affairs arranges financial and other aid for the flood-stricken parts of Queensland in February, an Army Black Hawk helicopter transports a pallet of supplies to Ingham to provide other forms of relief.

Cairns. Its number is 4048 8930.

The Veterans' and Veterans' Families' Counselling Service is available to assist veterans and their families in crises and provides supportive, confidential counselling to veterans and their families. It can be contacted on 1800 011 046, 24 hours a day.

The Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment for people affected by the North Queensland Floods is being administered by Centrelink. Affected persons, including DVA pensioners, should phone 180 2222 or visit their nearest Centrelink Customer Service Centre or Centrelink Agent.

Voluntary work not under threat — Minister

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Alan Griffin, has sought to reassure the veteran community that voluntary work with welfare organisations is not under any threat.

"A number of people have expressed concerns about how the Department of Veterans' Affairs treats voluntary work with community and welfare organisations under the Veterans' Entitlements

Act 1986, the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 and the Military, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004," he said on February 12. "There appears to be a belief that voluntary work is treated differently under SRCA and MRCA than it is under the VEA. Some people are concerned that undertaking voluntary work will trigger a review of incapacity payments. "This is not the case. I would urge any veteran or veterans' representative to refer to this statement should they have any issues with the way such matters are being interpreted.

To clarify the issue and reassure veterans wanting to do voluntary work, the Repatriation Commissioner, Brigadier Bill Rolfe AO (Retd), has written to a number of ex-service organisations and the Training and Information Program Committee chairmen to state:

- DVA is supportive of veterans undertaking voluntary work;
- voluntary work is treated the same under all three Acts; and
- undertaking voluntary work will not trigger a review of pension or incapacity payments.

A copy of the letter and policy statement is available at these web links:

www.dva.gov.au/temp/letter_to_es-osfeb.pdf
www.dva.gov.au/temp/vw_statement_attached_to_eso_letter.pdf



Part of the damaged bow of HMAS Melbourne after the collision with Voyager.

under minimal operational lighting, the Voyager tragically crossed the bows of the Melbourne, colliding [with it] in the darkness. The Voyager was sliced in two by the impact and the bow section sank within minutes."

Fourteen officers, 67 sailors and one

civilian dockyard employee had died lives. There had been 232 survivors.

"I ask that we all remember those Australians who have lost their lives in peace-time activities, humanitarian assistance or training, including the Voyager disaster," Mr Griffin said.