

COVID-19 - Targeting Support for the Repatriation of New Zealanders

Purpose

To seek agreement to the prioritisation and delivery of consular repatriation efforts for New Zealanders stranded offshore due to COVID-19, and to confirm the category of countries from which the Government will and will not offer repatriation flights.

Summary

During the COVID-19 crisis, the New Zealand Government has so far successfully organised or facilitated chartered repatriation flights for New Zealanders from China (Wuhan), Japan, Vanuatu, Peru and Uruguay. Through our consular network, we have also supported individuals' return to New Zealand from across the globe. Given resource constraints and differing conditions offshore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) has developed a risk assessment framework which implements criteria for government-assisted repatriation flights. However, while we are working closely with Five Nations consular partners and other countries to burden share, repatriations are expensive and resource-intensive.

2 The demand for repatriation will likely continue for some time. Despite clear Government advice over the last several weeks not to travel from New Zealand and to return home if they are able to, there are stranded New Zealanders all over the world. Many are located in comparatively low-risk countries s6(a) but a number are in moderate- or high-risk countries with no commercial airline options. Registrations on Safe Travel record that 7,623 New Zealanders are located in moderate-risk countries, and 3,326 are in high-risk countries, though the actual numbers may be higher and it is unclear how many of these are stranded travellers. It is beyond our resources to bring all New Zealanders home and there is an urgent need for clarity over where we will concentrate our efforts – and where we will not. Orchestrated charter options from low-risk countries also undermine efforts by commercial carriers to sustain routes which are important to New Zealand's broader economic activity.

3 Drawing on MFAT's risk assessment matrix (see Annex for more detail), which divides all countries where New Zealanders are located into "red" (high risk), "amber" (moderate risk) and "green" (low risk), we should clearly signal to those in the low-risk "green" countries and regions that Government will not organise repatriations. This will encourage them to use commercial airline options, which are still available (if often expensive) but may soon disappear. For New Zealanders in the "amber" countries, in most cases numbering fewer than

25 per country, s6(a)

4 s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(f)(iv)

There may be a range of options to work through for how New Zealanders could be repatriated, including working jointly with our partners. s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(g)(ii)

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5 This risk assessment matrix helps us to focus our repatriation efforts, but it is not intended to be exclusive or inflexible. s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(j)

6 The cost of these repatriation charters to Vote Foreign Affairs is estimated to be \$10-\$14 million once the immediate COVID-19 emergency has passed, depending on the number of flights, passengers and success of the recovery model being used.

Introduction

7 On 14 March 2020, the Government advised New Zealanders to avoid non-essential travel, and on 19 March issued a "do not travel" advisory for all countries. New Zealanders overseas who cannot return home for the time being are currently advised by MFAT to take steps to stay shelter in place where they are, and that assisted departure flights should not be relied upon to get home. More specifically, on 9 April New Zealanders in Europe registered on Safe Travel who wished to return home were advised to book commercial flights as soon as possible and were told that assisted departure flights could not be relied upon. s9(2)(f)(iv),

8 77,433 New Zealand citizens and permanent residents have heeded this advice and travelled home since 14 March, nearly all on commercial air routes. To date, MFAT has assisted a further 530 New Zealanders to return home, through consular assistance ranging from organising a full charter to essential logistical support to access commercial flights. A number have received loans to cover the costs of those flights, which are also available to pay for commercial flights.

9 It is estimated there are still several hundred thousand New Zealanders overseas. Most of them are not registered on New Zealand consular databases, and it is impossible to know exactly how many wish to return home or will look to the Government for repatriation assistance. Available data provides only a rough guide in this regard, but officials estimate the demand for repatriation assistance could be between one and several thousand. The numbers

may increase. As employment opportunities dry up, the intentions of New Zealand residents in other countries may change throughout the remainder of 2020. Commercial airline options continue to shrink (there are presently 29 direct flights a week to New Zealand, compared to 751 at the same time last year), which may also increase the possible reliance on repatriations. For a growing number, government-supported repatriation or sheltering in place will be the only option currently available to them. MFAT has provided consular staff with broader discretion to enable New Zealanders in distress to access financial assistance, notably loans to support the purchase of air tickets where their financial resources are exhausted.

10 On each occasion that New Zealand has undertaken its own repatriation flight, the assessment has been approved by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. These repatriations have proven an effective way to meet our consular obligations in circumstances where there is no other option, the situation on the ground is challenging, and there is a critical mass of people. However, such flights are also expensive, logistically complex and resource intensive.

The framework for repatriation – prioritisation and methodology

11 On 21 March 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs agreed five criteria to inform decisions regarding government-assisted repatriation flights to return stranded New Zealanders:

- For individuals who are fit for travel according to advice from health authorities;
- No commercial flight options to New Zealand are available;
- It is unsafe to shelter in place;
- 5 Nations partners are evacuating their citizens; and
- The New Zealand health system is not overwhelmed.

12 MFAT has developed a framework for implementing these criteria. This framework:

- Elaborates on the factors to be considered when applying these criteria, including the potential COVID-19 exposure risk to staff and the wider New Zealand population that repatriation flights pose;
- Evaluates air transport options for repatriation, including various ways of leveraging or sharing charters with priority partners (see below); and
- Incorporates a risk assessment matrix, which divides all countries where New Zealanders are known to be travelling or resident into red (high risk), amber or green (see attached Annexes). s6(a)

Preferred repatriation options

13 The optimal repatriation air transport options are those that require the least Government financial or other assistance, and get New Zealanders safely home. The Minister of Foreign Affairs has agreed that MFAT should rank repatriation options in descending order, from most to least preferred, as follows:

1. s6(a), s9(2)(j), s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
- 14 s6(a), s9(2)(j), s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)
- s6(a)
- s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

15 The use of NZDF assets sits alongside this framework as an option which may be useful and necessary in particular situations, particularly in the Pacific. This is still resource intensive, but can nonetheless be a useful niche option. For example, an NZDF C-130 was used to repatriate 39 New Zealanders on 11 April while returning from delivering aid for Tropical Cyclone Harold relief. Government-funded medical evacuations are also outside of this hierarchy. These are typically very expensive and rare, and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Standardised approach to cost recovery for repatriation charters

16 To ensure that the repatriation cost borne by New Zealanders is fair and proportionate, the Minister of Foreign Affairs agreed on 8 April that New Zealanders be charged a flat fee per person for government-assisted repatriation flights depending on flight duration as follows: up to 4 hours (\$1,500), 4 to 14 hours (\$3,500) and over 14 hours (\$5,500).

17 This approach is equitable across flights, simple to understand and administer, provides predictability, and strikes an appropriate balance between cost recovery and affordability. Flexibility is retained, however, for deciding on a case-by-case basis the appropriate cost recovery for charters shared with, or organised by, other countries. The scaled contribution approach will also not apply to medevacs (which are likely to be more expensive) or the use of NZDF assets (for which we have a long standing position of not charging). Those New Zealanders who are not able to afford these contributions upfront are provided an opportunity to instead sign an undertaking to pay MFAT back after returning to New Zealand.

Stocktake of repatriation efforts so far

18 MFAT is applying its repatriation framework to prioritise its repatriation efforts, while using the most efficient and cost effective transport options. As at 14 April, consular assistance of varying kinds has been provided in relation to 25 flights, charter and commercial, that have brought 530 New Zealanders home. The table below sets out those repatriations to date which have involved a Government-subsidised charter flight or especially heavy consular assistance, and records their actual or estimated net cost to government. s6(a)

Table – Repatriations already carried out or underway

Date	Country	Number of NZers	Type of Flight(s)	Cost of Charter	Cost Per Person	Cost recovery Per Person	Total Net Cost to Govt per Flight
<i>Flights that have already occurred or are under way</i>							
5-Feb-20	China (Wuhan)	98 (257 total)	NZ Charter	s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j)			
19-Feb-20	Japan	6	Australia Partner				
2-Apr-20	Nepal	27	Commercial	Passenger Paid (consular engagement required)			-
5-Apr-20	Switzerland	4	Swiss Charter	No Cost	-	-	-
11-Apr-20	Uruguay (Cruise)	16	Medivac	s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j)			
11-Apr-20	Vanuatu	39	NZDF	Cost Covered as part of Cyclone Relief			-
11-Apr-20	USA (Cruise)	16	Commercial	Passenger Paid (consular engagement required)			-
12-Apr-20	South Korea	35	Commercial (Air NZ)	Passenger Paid (consular engagement required)			-
14-Apr-20	Peru (Final numbers and cost TBC)	59	NZ Charter	s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j)			
Total		300		s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)			\$2,264,200

19 Once these repatriations have been completed, the total net cost to MFAT's budget is estimated at \$2,264,200. Where MFAT has helped to subsidise the flight, the average per passenger repatriation subsidy is approximately \$12,500.

20 Each repatriation has also been resource intensive. Complexity has been added by the need to negotiate transit agreements, health and airport protocols with local authorities, to ensure that proper medical screening takes place prior to boarding, and to offer seats where possible to foreign nationals. There are corresponding limits on how many repatriation exercises MFAT can run at any one time.

The Government cannot repatriate all New Zealanders who wish to return home and we need to message this clearly

21 The Government cannot offer repatriation to all New Zealanders who wish to return home from wherever they may be ^{s9(2)(g)(i)}. Nor is it possible to know exactly how many New Zealanders will seek repatriation, though available data may provide some guidance. Thus, 23,860 are registered on Safe Travel as being overseas, of whom 18,028 describe themselves as resident and 5,832 as travellers. Of these registrants, 3,326 are located in high-risk countries, 7,623 in moderate-risk countries and 11,850 in low-risk countries. The actual number of New Zealanders overseas in countries such as Australia and the UK is much higher, and may be in other countries too. In terms of the scale of possible demand for repatriation from this overseas population, additional consular data may provide some indication. Up to 868 New Zealanders currently identify themselves as "stranded travellers" (i.e. want to leave the country they are in) and 562 have recently required consular assistance due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions. There is a small overlap between these two groups - around 86 are in both groups – but equally, the number of those wanting to return home may be greater than those who have communicated this to MFAT. As conditions worsen overseas, more of those who classify themselves as resident may wish to return home. Taking all of this data together, it is possible that between one and several thousand New Zealanders may seek repatriation assistance.

22 ^{s6(a)}

23 It is therefore essential to decide now from which countries we choose not to offer repatriation, and communicate this clearly as soon as possible. This will give stranded New Zealanders as much time as possible to explore other travel options or to make better

arrangements to shelter in place. Failure to be clear on this could be offering perverse incentives. There is anecdotal evidence that New Zealanders in Europe are holding off using commercial air options because the ticket price is higher than normal and they are waiting to see if repatriation is offered or whether they can take advantage of evacuation flights being chartered by European governments to get their nationals home from New Zealand. Orchestrated charter options from low-risk countries also undermine efforts by commercial carriers to sustain routes which are important to New Zealand's broader economic activity.

24 There are also important equity considerations, particularly where the number of New Zealanders needing repatriation is small and the subsidy cost per passenger likely to be high. s9(2)(g)(i)

25 All of this suggests that when considering repatriation options, in particular chartering an aircraft, a number of factors should be weighed, within the prioritisation framework MFAT has developed to assess the most efficient repatriation options. These include s6(a)

the ability of a locally resident or accredited New Zealand High Commission or Embassy to assist, the number of New Zealanders who might request assisted repatriation, and the likely subsidy cost per passenger. Further, where a repatriation flight has been organised and New Zealanders choose not to take it, further flights will not be organised.

The need for close inter-agency coordination and planning

26 Once a decision has been made on which countries to prioritise repatriation from, close inter-agency coordination using existing centralised processes will be needed to ensure that the impact on border agencies, managed isolation/quarantine facilities, the health system and other support services such as housing is manageable and sustainable. This will require careful planning regarding the sequencing of flights, the number of passengers that are repatriated at any one time, their arrival destination and the lead time needed to ensure managed isolation/quarantine accommodation is in place. There will also need to be ongoing consideration of the extent to which passengers from high-risk locations may have come in contact with COVID-19, with measures in place to mitigate the risk to personnel they come into contact with and of potential onward transmission to the wider population in New Zealand.

27 s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

Our future approach to particular countries and regions

28 Applying this framework and the principles that underlie it, an approach is recommended for each category of countries in the risk matrix as follows:

Low risk countries rated “green”

- s6(a)
- s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)
-
-
- s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j)

Moderate risk countries rated “amber”

- s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

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s6(a)

High risk countries rated “red”

- s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

- s6(a)

- s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

29 Some flexibility will also need to be retained in the application of the risk assessment matrix. s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

There also needs to be flexibility around the categorisation of “amber” and “red” countries – and the treatment of New Zealanders wishing to come home from them. A change in circumstances may require a change in categorisation with decisions on individual repatriation flights taken on a case-by-case basis. The feasibility of transit options will also need increasingly to be taken into account, given how few direct flights to New Zealand now exist and the fact that the vast majority of New Zealanders now need to take several flights to get home, if they can get home at all. s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

Financial implications

30 MFAT has already spent \$2,264,200 on repatriation flights. The total direct cost for further chartered repatriation flights from high risk countries could be as high as \$8 million which would bring total government expenditure on charters due to COVID-19 into the range of \$10-\$14 million in this financial year. At this level of spending, this can be absorbed by MFAT through reprioritising from within the Vote Foreign Affairs baseline due to the reduction in other activity caused by COVID-19. However, it will require an output expense transfer to increase the Consular appropriation. This fiscally-neutral transfer will be progressed through a joint Ministers process. The New Zealand Government is also required to give indemnities to enter into charter contracts, and the fiscal risk of these varies.

Recommendations

31 The Minister of Foreign Affairs recommends that COVID-19 Ministers:

1. **Note** that hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders remain offshore and that a demand for government-assisted repatriation could come from between one and several thousand of them affected by the COVID-19 emergency.
2. **Note** that New Zealand Government repatriations carried out to date have been expensive and resource intensive; that the Government cannot bring home all New Zealanders who wish to return; and that with finite resources there is a need to prioritise future repatriations s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(f)(iv)
3. **Note** that MFAT is applying a repatriations framework that (i) categorises countries where New Zealanders are located as being high risk, medium risk, and low risk and (ii) deploys the most effective and resource-efficient transport options available.
4. s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)
5.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
6. **Note** that the operationalisation of the repatriations will continue to be undertaken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in consultation with the Minister of Foreign Affairs where a Ministerial decision is required.
7. **Note** that careful sequencing and coordinated planning of repatriation flights will be required to manage the impact on available capacity for managed isolation/quarantine, as well as any potential flow-on impacts for the health system and the provision of other services.

8. **Note** that the decision not to prioritise repatriation for New Zealanders in low-risk countries will be communicated publically as soon as possible to encourage New Zealanders to use commercial options to return home while they are still available.
9. **Note** that, applying this prioritisation approach, MFAT estimates that the cost of repatriation charter flights is likely to be in the order of \$10-\$14 million. This would be reprioritised from within Vote Foreign Affairs baseline through a joint Ministers process, by way of a fiscally neutral output expense transfer to increase the Consular appropriation.

Authorised for lodgement

Rt. Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Proactively Released

Annex: List of High Risk Countries/SafeTravel registrations (Populations over 50 bolded)

s6(a)

Proactively Released

Annex: List of Moderate Risk Countries/SafeTravel Registrations

s6(a)

Proactively Released

Annex: List of Low Risk Countries/SafeTravel Registrations

s6(a)

Proactively Released