

Date: Thursday 14 December 2023

Subject: Melissa Kate Reid submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Commonwealth Governments COVID-19 Response Inquiry. I am an Australian citizen who has been working in the humanitarian and international aid and development sector continuously since 2017. At the beginning of the pandemic, early 2020, I was living and working in South Sudan, based in Juba, with frequent travel to the field as I managed community-based programmes based on peacebuilding, nonviolence, and unarmed civilian protection. I monitored the Australian, and international news as the pandemic evolved, and how it altered the domestic and international landscape.

When the then-Australian Government urged all Australians' abroad to return home within an unrealistic period of time, I was both unable to do so, as the airport in Juba, South Sudan was closed, with all planes grounded, and I was also pivotal to managing my organisations COVID-19 response, ensuring my staff and colleagues, and beneficiaries were safe and supported, with up-to-date information, shifted programming, PPE and wellbeing support. The swift closure of Australia's borders meant that I was abandoned in South Sudan, and subjected to the negative rhetoric and vitriol resonating from not only the Australian community, but also leaders and politicians in regards to why Australians remained overseas, with this having a heavy toll on my mental health and emotional wellbeing.

I was committed to my work, and to serving the communities I was employed to support and work with, however, as COVID-19 intensified internationally, much international humanitarian aid funding was halted in order for foreign governments to redirect their international aid to serve their domestic citizens in the fight against COVID-19. As such, my contract concluded 30 June 2020 as funding for the program I managed ceased, and without formal employment, I could not, and was not allowed to continue to live in South Sudan. I was scheduled to depart South Sudan 4 June 2020, and by that point in time, there were very limited countries in the world (the United States of America, Ireland, Ethiopia, Tanzania) which I was legally allowed to enter, none of which was my home country, my country of citizenship, Australia. Having just opened their borders to international citizens, I moved to Zanzibar, Tanzania, not knowing for how long I would need to be there, and for how long I would be unemployed, draining my savings and going into debt without the prospect of employment as the international humanitarian sector effectively shut down hiring for no less than two years. Without any

financial support from my government that had locked me out of my country of citizenship, I was technically internationally displaced.

I moved to Malawi several months after living in Zanzibar as I luckily developed friendships with people living there, providing me with a very new, and somewhat basic support network. Whilst I was in Malawi, I only [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] so for another reason, I was stranded and trapped abroad, with Malawi government officials apprehensive to renew my Temporary Residence Permit, but knowing that if I was not allowed to stay, not only could I still not return to Australia, I could not travel to any other country that happened to have open borders. There is no Australian Embassy in Malawi, however I luckily tracked down an Australian woman [REDACTED] who acted as an unofficial ambassador for Australia's Embassy in Zimbabwe. I was living in Nkhata Bay, [REDACTED] and had to travel twice to the capital to meet with her, and arrange for a new passport. Including the cost of travel, accommodation, a corrupt fine concerning my passport and Temporary Residence Permit,, the cost of a new passport and the transport fees for my passport, my passport cost me approximately [REDACTED] which I believe is exorbitant considering the circumstances and unfair as the reason for these costs were out of my control, and really on the Australian Government, not on me.

Having a fresh passport meant that I could get back to looking for work in the international humanitarian sector, although employment opportunities remained scarce at that juncture. My family wished for me to return home however there are several reasons why I could not. One, there were no available flights, two, Australian borders remained closed, three, any repatriation flights would have cost upwards of \$15,000, four, no repatriation flights were departing from an airport which I could feasibly get two within 48 hours notice, and five, if I were to somehow return to Australia, I would not have been allowed to leave if I were to successfully acquire a job in my sector.

11 months after being homeless in Africa, having drained my savings and relying on support from [REDACTED] I secured employment in Iraq, yet, was still not allowed to enter Australia for around another year, and when the borders finally did open, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I missed the birth of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the funeral of [REDACTED] and seeing [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I continue to feel fundamentally let down by Australia, and feel that how Australia, Australians, and the Australian Government treated Australians abroad was unfair, unjust and simply, just really disappointing. Communications with Australian's abroad was also lacking, with the best source of information shared by other Australians stranded overseas via social media, who also happened to be the best support network.

The government should never have locked us out of our country, and should never have locked citizens within the country and whilst this has been done, it should never happen again as the emotional strain, and sheer feelings of being abandoned by your country to fend for yourself when the whole world is on fire is utterly devastating.

Thank you for your time,

Melissa Reid