

## **HON JUDITH COLLINS, MINISTER OF DEFENCE**

### **MIDDLE EAST: CONSULAR UPDATE AND REPATRIATION PLAN**

June 2026

This publication provides a briefing to the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the Middle East: Consular Update and Repatriation Plan. The briefing sought approval for NZDF personnel to assist the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to undertake consular operations in the Middle East. It also sought approval for pre-positioned aircraft to undertake military assisted departures in high threat locations in the region as a contingency.

The pack comprises the following documents:

- Ministerial Briefing *Briefing: Middle East: Consular Update and Repatriation Plan*, 7 March 2026

This pack has been released on the Ministry of Defence website, available at:

[www.defence.govt.nz/publications](http://www.defence.govt.nz/publications).

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NZDF ref:

MFAT ref:

MoD ref: 28-2026

Minister of Foreign Affairs For approval by 7 March 2026

Minister of Defence For approval by 7 March 2026

### BRIEFING: MIDDLE EAST: CONSULAR UPDATE AND REPATRIATION PLAN

**PURPOSE** To seek approval for New Zealand Defence Force personnel to assist the Ministry of Foreign and Trade to undertake consular operations in the Middle East, and to seek approval for the two pre-positioned aircraft to undertake military assisted departures in high threat locations in the region as a contingency.

#### Recommended referrals

Prime Minister For information by 7 March 2026

#### Agency contact

NAME	POSITION, ORGANISATION
Katie Roche	Acting Head International Branch, Ministry of Defence
BRIG Andrew Shaw	Assistant Chief – Strategic Commitments and Engagements, New Zealand Defence Force
Brad Burgess	Divisional Manager – Consular Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

s9(2)(a)

#### Agency consultation

The following agencies were involved:  
Ministry of Defence  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
New Zealand Defence Force

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## Key points

- Approximately 3400 New Zealanders remain stranded or are sheltering in place in the Middle East following US/Israeli missile strikes on Iran and subsequent retaliatory military action by Iran.
- On 5 March 2026, the Minister of Foreign Affairs approved the pre-positioning of two C-130J Hercules aircraft and New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) personnel closer to the Middle East region as a contingency deployment in case consular support was needed. The aircraft were also approved to support consular operations in low-to-medium risk locations.

## Proposed Plan

- s9(2)(f)(iv), s6(b)(i) s6(b)(i) Officials across government have been undertaking planning alongside the NZDF for the consular operation.
- The current plan to assist the departure of New Zealanders is as follows:
  - Continue to direct New Zealanders to self-book on any scheduled flights with seats available.
  - Continue planning to move New Zealanders over land borders to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (from Bahrain, s6(a) or Qatar) s6(a) s6(a). From these locations, New Zealanders can connect with self-booked travel.
  - Consider the option for MFAT to charter a flight from the UAE or Muscat directly to s6(a)
- While the use of the C-130J Hercules to extract stranded New Zealanders is no longer a priority means of evacuation, it remains an important contingency option. The current plan is for the aircraft to pre-position and maintain a high level of readiness.

## Further Approvals sought

- s6(a) s6(a) Officials believe that it may be necessary to deploy NZDF personnel and/or C-130J Hercules to evacuate New Zealanders from high-risk locations at short notice.
- This requires additional permissions through approval by both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence. As such, officials recommend that Ministers approve the deployment of the NZDF aircraft in support of consular operations in high risk locations, as a contingency.
- Military assisted departures within the region, including to high risk locations would continue to require further approval from the Chief Executives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF), and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), subject to a strategic conditions check, consistent with the permissions approved by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 5 March.
- To ensure that the NZDF and MFAT are able to undertake consular operations in a rapidly evolving environment, including in higher risk locations, this paper also seeks approval from Ministers to:
  - Deploy up to s6(a) in support of MFAT consular efforts across the Middle East region, including potentially the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, s9(f)(iv) s9(f)(iv) and Saudi Arabia. This number is inclusive of the s6(a)

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approved in the previous submission. Personnel approved to deploy in support of consular operations may undertake a range of processing, facilitating and monitoring tasks in support of MFAT;

s6(b)(i)

*AW*  
**T DAVIES**  
Air Marshal  
Chief of Defence Force

Date: *6/3/26*

**VICTORIA HALLUM**  
For Secretary of Foreign Affairs  
and Trade

Date: *6/3/26*

**RICHARD SCHMIDT**  
Deputy Secretary, Policy  
and Planning  
Ministry of Defence

Date: *6/3/26*

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## Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

1. **Note** that on 5 March, approval was provided to pre-position two NZDF aircraft and personnel near to the Middle East region to undertake consular operations in low/medium threat environments, subject to a strategic conditions check and approval by the Chief Executives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF), and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). **Noted**
2. **Note** that to be able to effectively undertake consular operations in a rapidly evolving security environment, the NZDF may need to undertake these operations to high-risk environments, which necessitates additional approvals from Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence. **Noted**
3. **Agree** to increase the total number of NZDF personnel providing support to MFAT consular efforts from s6(a) across the Middle East region, likely to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain s9(f)(iv) and Saudi Arabia. **Yes / No**
4. **Note** that as part of MFAT's response to the crisis, an Emergency Response Team is also deploying to support over land assisted departure operations as part of the consular response. **Yes / No**
5. **Agree** that the NZDF may undertake military assisted departures with NZDF aircraft in the region including under a high threat operational environment, subject to a strategic conditions check and approval by the Chief Executives of MFAT, the NZDF, and MoD. **Yes / No**
6. [Redacted] s6(b)(i) **Yes / No**
7. [Redacted] s6(b)(i) **Yes / No**
8. **Refer** a copy of this submission to the Prime Minister. **Yes / No**

RT HON WINSTON PETERS  
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Date

HON JUDITH COLLINS KC  
Minister of Defence

Date: 6/03/2026

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## Report

### Background

s6(b)(i)

2. There are a significant number of New Zealanders who remain stranded in the region due to the impact of the conflict and restrictions on commercial air services. Currently over 3,300 New Zealanders have registered on SafeTravel, and it is suspected that there are many more who have not registered.
3. While it is unclear how many New Zealanders require assistance to immediately leave, 582 New Zealanders are registered in Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait whose airspace remains closed. 2,048 New Zealanders are registered as being in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), though flights have departed to Sydney and Auckland in the last day with spare capacity. A message will be sent to New Zealanders in these four countries today to identify how many require urgent assistance to leave.
4. Given the significant uncertainty inherent in this conflict, we cannot be sure when airspace will reliably open across the region or when commercial flights will become widely available for New Zealanders to return home.
5. To prepare for potential assisted departures, on 5 March 2026 the Minister of Foreign Affairs approved:
  - 5.1. To pre-position two C-130J Hercules aircraft and personnel in the wider region as a contingency deployment, and to deploy into the Middle East to low/medium risk destinations, to provide consular services should they be needed to evacuate vulnerable New Zealanders.

s6(a)

7. Ministers will be informed in advance of any military assisted departure.

### Authorisation for defence support to consular operations

8. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade has the authority to approve NZDF deployments in consular situations where the Chief of Defence Force confirms the availability of personnel and/or assets, and baseline funding for the proposed operation; that the operational threat level is assessed as medium or low; and host government approval to operate is likely to be granted. [FPS-25-MIN-0027 refers].
9. For consular operations outside these conditions, the approval of the Minister of Defence is also required.

s6(a)

s6(a)

10. To reflect evolving planning, further approval is sought in this submission from the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs for the NZDF to support consular operations, both with NZDF personnel and with the pre-positioned NZDF aircraft.

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## Updated Plan

11. Work is underway to develop a plan by which transport assistance (currently focussed on chartered buses) would be provided for New Zealanders to cross land borders into Saudi Arabia (from Bahrain, s9(f)(iv) or s9(2)(f)(iv) s9(f)(iv) s9(f)(iv). These movements would allow them to connect with commercial flights from Riyadh s9(f)(iv).

## NZDF Personnel in support of response

12. MFAT will deploy consular staff to support these transfers and has requested personnel support from the NZDF. This would involve supporting tasks such as:
- 12.1. Processing New Zealanders at designating muster points in the country of departure (reviewing travel documents, checking against the list of registrants, security checks, etc.).
  - 12.2. Accompanying the New Zealanders during the bus journey, facilitating the crossing of borders, and providing reassurance to the passengers.
  - 12.3. Facilitating airport check-in, immigration, and customs procedures if required.
  - 12.4. Monitoring the security environment.
13. In order to adequately support the consular response, these personnel would need to be able to deploy across the Middle East region. s6(a) s6(a)
14. This requires up to s6(a) NZDF personnel to support the consular operation – including the s6(a) personnel approved in the previous submission – to enable concurrent air and ground operations in multiple locations.

## Additional permissions for NZDF aircraft

15. While the primary line of effort for repatriating New Zealanders will be focussed on commercial and charter aircraft, the situation in the region remains unstable, and there remains a chance that the pre-positioned NZDF aircraft may need to undertake consular operations into high threat environments at short notice.

s6(b)(i)

s6(b)(i)

## Financial Implications

18. The costs of this deployment are: a total cost of s9(2)(g)(i) which will be funded from NZDF baselines with s9(2)(g)(i) for the operational deployment and s9(2)(g)(i) for Veterans Support Entitlement as this deployment is likely to be declared “qualifying operational service” under the Veterans’ Support Act 2014.
19. The cost of the operational deployment of s9(2)(g)(i) will exceed the available funding in 2025/26 within Vote Defence Force: Operations Contributing to New Zealand’s Security, Stability, and Interests. NZDF will continue to assess opportunities to reprioritise funding

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within the Vote Defence Force appropriation before seeking additional funding, noting that further missions are likely to require additional funding.

20. The estimated cost of s9(2)(g)(i) for Veterans Support Entitlement can be met from the Non-Departmental Service Cost – Veterans' Entitlements appropriation.
21. The deployment of consular Emergency Response teams by MFAT will also be met within MFAT baseline.
22. s6(a) New Zealanders would not be charged for flights onboard NZDF assets. If commercial options were used to support an NZDF operation, a partial cost-recovery model (up to 50% of the cost) would be used.

### Legal Implications

s6(a)

s6(a)

### *Law of Armed Conflict*

26. As this is an assisted departure of New Zealanders and other eligible persons only, the deployment will not amount to involvement in the ongoing hostilities in the region. Any actions taken by NZDF will only be in self-defence in order to protect nationals and deployed personnel, and will not amount to participation in armed conflict.

s6(a)

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## Risks and mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
<p><b>That the NZDF aircraft will not be needed as commercial flights have resumed by the time the two C-130s arrives.</b></p>	<p>Maintain close communication with airlines on departure plans. Move the NZDF aircraft into pre-position as soon as possible. Operational decision at CE level to cancel deployment if it becomes clear before flights depart that need has significantly reduced.</p>
s6(a)	
<p><b>New Zealanders unhappy that travellers in some locations are prioritised for evacuation over others.</b></p>	<p>Clear communication to New Zealanders that operational decisions will be made on the basis of airspace status and diplomatic approvals to operate. Convey that seats on evacuation flights will be allocated primarily on a first-come first-served basis, but also on the basis of need. This is the standard approach to all evacuation scenarios.</p>
<p><b>Significant numbers of New Zealanders stranded in the staging location.</b></p>	<p>Engagement with airlines to ensure visibility of capacity. Our communications to New Zealanders would be clear that the purpose of the operation is to evacuate them to a safe space and they would need to take responsibility for onward travel.</p>
s6(a)	
<p><b>Breakdown of NZDF aircraft.</b></p>	<p>Maintenance crew to be deployed with aircraft.</p>

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