

Chair

Cabinet COVID-19 Committee

COVID-19 ANTARCTIC ISSUES: PROVIDING EMERGENCY AND ESSENTIAL SUPPORT TO ANTARCTIC STATIONS THROUGH NEW ZEALAND

Proposal

- 1 This paper responds to the direction from the COVID-19 Committee on 18 March (CVD-20-MIN-0017 refers) to provide further advice to Ministers on related issues concerning travel to and from Antarctica. This paper also seeks decisions to ensure that *emergency* and *essential* support can continue to be provided to keep Antarctic stations in the Ross Sea region safe, in the context of limiting the spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand or in Antarctica and in line with New Zealand's role as an Antarctic 'gateway' country.
- 2 In particular, the paper seeks Ministers' consideration of three cases of movement of people, aircraft and vessels. These are:
 - 2.1 enabling flights to deliver essential supplies to Antarctica and return New Zealand and American personnel from Antarctica to New Zealand in April;
 - 2.2 permitting the Republic of Korea's Ice Breaker *Araon*, currently en route from Antarctica, to berth at Lyttelton harbour on 9 April, disembark four New Zealand citizens and one New Zealand resident and 15 foreign nationals, and re-provision for the onward journey to the Republic of Korea; and
 - 2.3 noting New Zealand's search and rescue coordination obligations for the Ross Sea Sector of the Antarctic, which include coordinating aircraft and vessels to undertake any medical or other evacuations that may be required.

Background

The Impact of COVID-19 on Emergency and Essential Support to Antarctic Stations

- 3 s6(a)

April

is the month in which the transition from summer to winter arrangements are made; winter supplies need to be delivered and summer Antarctic programme personnel need to return.
- 4 New Zealand has a legal obligation to coordinate search and rescue for the Ross Sea sector of Antarctica. We also provide communications, logistics support, and preparedness for emergency response, including potentially medical evacuation.
- 5 These movements of people and essential cargo are predicated on legally binding cooperation agreements with Antarctic partner countries – namely the United States, South Korea and Italy. In addition to commitments on cooperation on scientific research, these agreements cover matters such as entry to and transit through New Zealand as a "gateway" to Antarctica. Movements are also predicated on

logistics sharing arrangements, s6(a)

- 6 MBIE has confirmed that provision of support to Scott Base is an essential service. Scott Base is a significant research facility that requires constant attentiveness and it is central to supporting New Zealand's strategic interests in Antarctica. s6(a)

Principles for considering Antarctic issues in the COVID-19 context

- 7 The considerations in this paper prioritise:
- Limiting COVID-19 risks to New Zealand and Antarctica arising from Antarctic operations;
 - Applying requirements consistent with New Zealand's response to COVID-19, including the requirements of Alert Level 4;
 - Providing the essentials for life in Antarctica including the provision of supplies, and coordinating emergency evacuations and search and rescue functions; and
 - Maintaining New Zealand's strategic interests in Antarctica, including New Zealand's role as an Antarctic gateway country.

Antarctic related movements: decisions required to enable essential support

7. There are three cases of movements of people, aircraft and vessels that require the consideration of this Committee, as follows:

Flights to Scott Base and McMurdo in April 2020

8. In order to prepare McMurdo Station and Scott Base for the winter months and as part of shared logistics arrangements, the United States Antarctic Programme (USAP) and Antarctica New Zealand (Antarctica NZ) have planned re-supply flights to occur in April (weather and runway conditions permitting). These flights are required to deliver essential medical and other supplies to the stations and to return approximately 120 USAP personnel from McMurdo and one New Zealander from Scott Base. The USAP and Antarctica NZ have stressed that it is essential for the health and safety of these personnel that they be uplifted from Antarctica in the next month. These personnel had not intended to "winter" in Antarctica, s6(b)
9. The flights are planned to be conducted by an Australian aircraft s6(a)
- The Australian airbus would fly from Melbourne to Antarctica in early to mid-April (weather permitting) to collect passengers from Antarctica before continuing on to New Zealand. It would then conduct further (two or three) flights to and from Antarctica to deliver essential cargo (which is currently in Christchurch) and

pick up the remaining passengers. On completion of the flights, the Australian aircraft would return to Melbourne¹.

10. The Ministry of Health (MoH) has determined that the health risk of using an Australian plane and crew to complete these essential tasks can be managed provided the crew fulfil MoH risk mitigation requirements, namely the "Advice to airline crew on precautions to reduce risk of COVID-19 infection". These requirements have been communicated to both the USAP and the Australian crew and both have agreed to the measures.
11. The MoH has confirmed that there are currently no COVID-19 related risks associated with people coming from Antarctica; COVID-19 is not present in Antarctica.
12. The returning US and New Zealand personnel have all been in Antarctica for more than four weeks. The USAP and Antarctica New Zealand have given assurance that the returning personnel will go into self-funded self-isolation upon arrival in New Zealand. For the US personnel, this will be either until they are evacuated from New Zealand (in accordance with any requirements for the evacuation of foreign nationals), or after 14 days have passed, whichever is soonest. If the US personnel are still in New Zealand after a 14 day self-isolation, they would comply with the Alert Level Four restrictions.

s6(a), s7(a)(iv)

15. Ministry of Transport advises that the Civil Aviation Act 1990 requires that non-scheduled flights, such as those proposed between Antarctica and New Zealand, are authorised by the Secretary for Transport or delegate. If Ministers agree that the essential flights from/to Antarctica can proceed, the Australian aircraft operator would be expected to follow its normal past practice and apply to the Ministry of Transport for authorisation.
16. Given that the MoH advises that the health risks of both the Australian aircraft and crew, and the personnel returning from the US and New Zealand Antarctic programmes can be managed, it is recommended that the Committee agree to the continuation of essential flights to Antarctica in April as outlined above.

¹ Christchurch is the most accessible gateway city from McMurdo Station. This is why the Australian aircraft is scheduled to fly from McMurdo to Christchurch rather than returning directly to Melbourne from Antarctica.

Republic of Korea Ice Breaker – Araon

17. *Araon* left Antarctica on 22 March and is currently en route to Lyttelton, where, under normal circumstances, it would re-provision, offload passengers and cargo, and then continue its voyage to the Republic of Korea. There are 20 passengers on board seeking to disembark. By the time of arrival in New Zealand all passengers and crew will have been at sea for 18 days.

18. The *Araon* must re-fuel for its onward journey and allowing resupply supports our status as a responsible maritime state. As the search and rescue state responsible for this region it would be unwise for New Zealand to refuse entry and place the ship at heightened risk due to lack of fuel and provisions. [s9(2)(h)]

MOH has assessed that there are no health risks associated with the *Araon* berthing. The port has necessary preventative measures in place regarding the required pilotage and interactions between the ship and the port.

19. The passengers seeking to disembark are four New Zealand citizens, one New Zealand resident (UK citizen), one Canadian, and 14 Italians. [s6(a), s7(a)(iv)]

The remaining nine Korean passengers and one Russian passenger will remain on board and will continue to the Republic of Korea.

20. Berthing of the *Araon* at Lyttelton allows for the disembarkation of four New Zealand citizens on-board. This is preferable to them remaining on board and voyaging on to the Republic of Korea where the New Zealand citizens could potentially become consular cases, seeking New Zealand government assistance to return to New Zealand.

21. MOH has agreed that the time spent at sea and the absence of reports of COVID-19 related health issues presents a low health risk. MoH also considers that their time at sea means the passengers and crew of the have already completed the equivalent of a self-isolation period. On this basis, the MoH are comfortable with the arrival of the vessel and the disembarkation of passengers, subject to current health assessment practice, and provided practical arrangements for meeting Alert Level Four restrictions and any further requirements for the evacuation of foreign nationals can be met. Officials will assess the arrangements made by the passengers prior to disembarkation, and Government officials, including from Ministry of Health, will need to be satisfied as to the adequacy of the proposed self-isolation arrangements upon arrival. All passengers proposed to disembark *Araon* will go into self-funded self-isolation. For the foreign nationals, this will be until such time as they are evacuated from New Zealand (and in accordance with requirements for the evacuation of foreign nationals) or the 14 days have passed, whichever is soonest. If the Italian and Canadian personnel were still in New Zealand after a 14 day period of self-isolation, they would then be required to comply with the Alert Level Four restrictions.

22. [s9(2)(h), s6(a)]

s6(a), s9(2)(h)

23. Berthing of the *Araon* includes cargo handling and bunkering. Any cargo offloaded would be within the Ministry of Transport guidelines for essential cargo. The cargo operations schedule has been minimised to only discharge and load those items which are necessary and limit interactions and time required for port staff. The cargo handling and bunkering schedule has been reduced from the usual five day port stay to two days.

Search and Rescue

24. As noted above, New Zealand has an obligation to coordinate search and rescue for the Ross Sea sector of Antarctica. In practice, this means coordinating flights (conducted by New Zealand or other aircraft) or tasking vessels as required to respond to various emergency situations, including potentially medical evacuation, in the Ross Sea region. Rescue coordination is an essential service which will continue, including in relation to Antarctica.

Preparation for next season

25. Officials will revert to the Committee by August to seek decisions on the essential support required to prepare the stations for the “spring” transition. s9(2)(f)(iv)

Currently, foreign nationals who want to enter New Zealand in order to travel to Antarctica as part of a National Antarctic Programme are subject to the current travel restrictions.

Financial implications

26. There are no financial implications arising from the decisions in this paper.

Consultation

27. This paper has been prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in consultation with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry for Primary Industries, the Ministry of Transport, Customs and Maritime New Zealand. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has been informed.

Recommendations

The Minister of Foreign Affairs recommends that the Committee:

Essential Support to Antarctic Stations

- 1 **note** that in March 2020, Cabinet directed that the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade officials (CVD-20-MIN-0017 refers) provide further advice to Ministers on related issues concerning Antarctica travel;
- 2 **note** that the MoH has confirmed that there are currently no COVID-19 related risks associated with people coming from Antarctica; COVID-19 is not present in Antarctica;
- 3 **note** that as an Antarctic “gateway” country, New Zealand has an essential role in supporting Antarctic stations in the Ross Sea region;
- 4 **note** that April is a critical month for preparing Antarctic stations for the winter;
- 5 **note** that provision for essential and emergency support to Antarctic stations through New Zealand is required as part of our Antarctic responsibilities, as well as to keep New Zealanders in Antarctica safe, and can be delivered whilst preventing increased COVID-19 related risks to people in New Zealand or in Antarctica;
- 6 **note** that all personnel proposed to return from Antarctica to New Zealand, as part of the movements described in this paper, will go into self-funded self-isolation on arrival in New Zealand. For the foreign nationals, this will be until such time as they are evacuated from New Zealand (and in accordance with any requirements for the evacuation of foreign nationals) or the 14 days have passed, after which they would be required to comply with the alert level 4 restrictions. Plans for self-isolation will be scrutinised before arrival in New Zealand and Government officials, including from Ministry of Health, will also need to be satisfied as to the adequacy of the proposed self-isolation arrangements upon arrival;
- 7 **note** that MBIE has confirmed that provision of support to Scott Base is an essential service;
- 8 **note** that officials will revert to the Committee by August to seek decisions on the essential support required to prepare the stations for the “spring” transition.

Flights to Scott Base and McMurdo in April 2020

- 9 **agree** to flights by an Australian aircraft, planned for April, to take essential supplies to Scott Base and McMurdo Station and bring US and New Zealand personnel from Antarctica to New Zealand (in accordance with recommendation 6 above);

Republic of Korea Ice Breaker – Araon

- 10 **agree** that the Republic of Korea Ice Breaker the *Araon* be permitted to berth, re-provision, and bunker at Lyttelton and that the five New Zealand citizens and one resident, and associated cargo disembark (in accordance with recommendation 6 above);

- 11 **agree** that the 14 Italian and one Canadian passengers on the *Araon* be permitted to disembark (in accordance with recommendation 6 above);

Search and Rescue

- 12 **note** that New Zealand agencies will continue to meet search and rescue obligations for the Ross Sea Sector, including permitting aircraft undertaking any medical evacuations that may be required.

Authorised for lodgement

Rt Hon Winston Peters

Minister of Foreign Affairs