

Office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs

Chair, Ad Hoc Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 Response

## **COVID-19: Repatriation Flights: a Framework for Decision-making on the Repatriation of Foreign Nationals**

### **Proposal**

There are around 380,000 foreigners in New Zealand on temporary work visas, many of whom wish to return home. Some governments are seeking to organise repatriation flights for their citizens. This paper considers the range of issues which should factor into whether and how the New Zealand Government approves such flights. The paper recommends that we place a temporary hold on such repatriation flights till 1 April, so that a framework for considering and managing the requests of foreign governments can be developed.

### **Background**

2 Like New Zealanders, stranded foreign nationals in New Zealand are expected to shelter in place, unless they have secured arrangements to depart. While it is difficult to know how many wish to leave, there are estimated to be in excess of 80,000 foreign visitors in New Zealand (plus 300,000 on temporary student and work visas). Several foreign governments wish to sponsor assisted departure flights for these people, with the first scheduled as early as today (27 March).

3 A 25 March paper to COVID Ministers noted that, with New Zealand likely to be subject to movement restrictions for some time, we should keep under review the option of government-sponsored assisted departures of foreign nationals in coming weeks. Where possible, we should only facilitate government-sponsored assisted departures if that can be done in a measured way that the New Zealand government system can sustain and that does not jeopardise our overarching objective to stop the spread of COVID19. The purpose of this paper is to develop a decision-making framework for those choices, reflecting the following considerations:

- (i) *"Flattening the curve"*. A balance-of-benefits judgement needs to be made on the net impact on the public health system of facilitating managed departures.
  - a. Getting foreign nationals out would remove a small amount of demand on public health services. But that is only net beneficial if departures can

be facilitated in a way that minimises the further spread of the virus (see below).

- b. Judgements also need to be informed by a view on whether foreign nationals are more likely to fail to comply with the Level 4 requirements or in other ways place disproportionate pressure on our systems. s9(2)(f)(iv)

(ii) *Shelter in place.* To prevent further spread of COVID19, our overriding national priority is shutting down the movement of people within New Zealand. An exception to our shelter-in-place policy should only be countenanced where foreign nationals can move within New Zealand subject to conditions that minimise the risk of further spread of the virus. Operational plans in place to support incoming commercial flights would need to be adapted for government-sponsored assisted departures to ensure:

- a. Assurances that assisted departure flights or certain passengers on these flights are not going to be turned around and returned to New Zealand;
- b. Protection from virus transmission for staff and other New Zealanders involved in supporting assisted departures; and
- c. Preventing inadvertent spread during movements to airports of departure by foreign nationals, e.g. by requiring individuals to test asymptomatic prior to movement.

(iii) *Scarce resources.* With the public service stretched to deliver operationally, the work of managing these flights would need to be done against the backdrop of many other competing demands. We would need a clear operational view that this work could be prioritised and sustained at the pace expected of those foreign governments seeking to sponsor assisted departures s6(a), s6(b)

(iv) *Foreign policy.* Foreign governments have an expectation of assisted departures. They are seeking to undertake them in other jurisdictions – and we are keeping a watching brief for opportunities for our nationals to avail themselves of such flights. s6(a)

(v) *Practical Arrangements.* Arranging repatriation flights is a complex and resource intensive exercise. Foreign governments must take responsibility for ensuring all health and logistical arrangements are in place and to the satisfaction of relevant authorities before flights will be approved.

4 As second order issues, it is worth noting that chartered aircraft being brought into New Zealand by foreign governments could be used to bring home our nationals. Those aircraft could also be used for air freight of essential supplies, including pharmaceuticals. However, taking advantage of freight opportunities will require longer timelines for repatriation flights of foreign nationals.

5 We do not yet have arrangements and systems in place to manage government sponsored assisted departures against our Level 4 restrictions; and the government is facing high operational demands in other areas. We suggest therefore that foreign governments be told we may be in a position to facilitate managed departures from the point at which commercial options dry up - i.e. after 1 April.

## **Consultation**

6 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade drafted this paper. The Ministries of Health, Transport, Education and MBIE have commented on this paper, and agree with its overall direction.

## **Recommendations**

7 We recommend that you:

7.1 Note that we are encouraging New Zealanders overseas and foreign nationals in New Zealand to “shelter in place” unless they have secured arrangements to depart, but that options for assisted departures are being kept under review.

7.2 Agree that no assisted departures of foreign nationals in New Zealand should occur for the remainder of March 2020.

7.3 Agree that officials should, by 1 April, report back to COVID Ministers with a framework for considering foreign governments' requests to approve and support repatriation flights.

7.4 Agree that key principles in operationalising managed departures by foreign nationals that would need to be met would include:

- That managed departures are assessed not to increase the burden on the New Zealand public health system.
- That any movements must be managed in a way that minimises the risk of the further spread of COVID19 within New Zealand.
- That resources could be allocated by the New Zealand Government to manage assisted departures without taking away from higher priorities.
- That foreign governments can prove all health and logistical arrangements are in place and to the satisfaction of relevant New Zealand authorities.

7.5 Agree that we advise foreign governments to suspend planning for government chartered repatriation flights departing New Zealand before 1 April and until such time as a framework is in place.

7.6 s6(a)

7.7 s6(a)

7.8 Note that, should we agree to assisted departures by foreign governments, the inwards flights may present opportunities to repatriate New Zealanders from overseas and to bring in essential supplies via air freight.