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**Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade Committee: Joint**

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SPEECH

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Speaker Stott Despoja, Sen Natasha

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Senator STOTT DESPOJA (South Australia) (9.52 am)—I rise to speak on the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Australia's response to the Indian Ocean tsunami* and on the roundtable discussion. I support the remarks made by the chair and Senator Webber. I want to specifically address, recognise and commend the efforts of all of those who contributed to the rescue and salvage effort in the aftermath of the tsunami. In particular, I draw attention to a group of Australians who participated in one of the grimmest tasks of the effort: the identification of victims.

The Australian DVI contingent, comprising Australian Federal Police and members of our state police forces, performed a gruesome task in a challenging environment in assisting with the identification of more than 5,395 bodies recovered in Thailand alone. In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the Australian Federal Police and state and territory police forces sent a contingent of DVI staff to Phuket in Thailand to begin the task. The group included DVI specialists, family support officers, welfare officers and communication support staff under the command of Karl Kent of the AFP Forensic Field Services, who was requested by Thai authorities to take on the role of joint chief of staff coordinating the response.

The Australians joined forces with more than 600 others from 30 different countries and, of course, the Royal Thai police, under Deputy Commissioner General Nopodal Somboonsub, to form the TTVI, the Thai Tsunami Victims Identification. Last year I had the privilege of meeting with General Nopodal as well as the Australian and international DVI contingents. My special thanks to AFP Agent Bernie Young and Detective Inspector Tony Cerritelli for their assistance. I witnessed some of their vital work and experienced first-hand—albeit briefly compared to what they had to deal with—the challenging environment they endured. In addition to the stifling heat and humidity, DVI workers faced long journeys to their work sites. The DVI post-mortem sites were improvised facilities featuring rows of refrigerated containers housing bodies. They worked on what was dubbed the ‘mortuary line’—that is, examination tables set up under shade cloth with only mobile fans to battle the heat—for 12 hours each day. They were gathering victims’ clothes, jewellery and other samples for the purposes of DNA testing. The teams processed up to 180 bodies a day.

Sergeant Cheryl Brown from the South Australian police force was second in charge of one of the mortuary sites. She described the difficulty of the task, saying:

The sheer scale of the catastrophe was overwhelming, and the task of identifying people was made difficult due to the heat, humidity and rapid decomposition of the bodies.

Victims’ bodies were identified using fingerprints, dental records or DNA. Samples were cross-matched with those obtained from other sources. Accessing these secondary samples required the assistance of other state and territory police in Australia. They had the critical task of approaching next of kin for DNA and other items, such as toothbrushes and hairbrushes, which would have DNA on them.

Confirming the identity of many victims proved difficult in many cases due to a lack of ante-mortem data, such as dental records. In the case of local victims, many of them had no such records whatsoever. By July last year, six months after the tsunami, 30 per cent of Thai victims had been identified. When you compare that to the German victims, you will see that 94 per cent of German victims were identified by that time. The advanced state of decomposition of many of the bodies also hampered the retrieval of samples for the purposes of identification. Tragically, the identification of the tsunami’s youngest victims also proved incredibly difficult. Many children were simply too young to even have dental or fingerprint records.

The DVI team have also had to deal with a community that has been influenced by the ‘CSI effect’—that is, the television phenomenon where investigations are quickly resolved due to quick processing of critical forensic evidence, mirroring the pace of the television shows. In reality, the collection and processing of forensic information and evidence is much less glamorous and takes much longer. Dramatic breakthroughs that crack the case are rare. In fact, in optimum conditions, a full DNA profile will take around two weeks to obtain from

a tissue sample. Obviously, the DVI teams took longer. In the initial aftermath of the tsunami, some members of the media and the public struggled to comprehend these so-called delays in identification processes and in the repatriation of the victims' bodies. But this was painstaking work requiring attention to detail and enormous patience and dedication, and it allowed no room for mistakes.

Many of the Australian DVI contingent donated their time. People took holidays in order to be a part of this process, to be a part of this extraordinary international effort. It was cooperation on a scale that I have never witnessed, and I want to pay tribute to it. It is important that we provide support to those DVI workers returning to Australia. When you imagine the conditions that they have been in and the work that they have had to do, we must ensure that they are looked after when they get home, whether it is counselling, support or services in other ways.

The remains of the last Australian victim of the tsunami were identified in August last year, but Australian DVI staff remained in Thailand until December, continuing the task of identifying more than 1,600 remains. Australians were working with other people from around the world to identify all victims, not just Australian victims. At the DVI worksite that I visited, the temporary international community erected a wall of remembrance to commemorate the tsunami's victims. The name of each country affected by the tsunami was inscribed along a long whitewashed wall which stretched off into the distance. It said:

This wall of Remembrance represents a memorial to the victims, families and relatives whose lives were so devastated by the Asian tsunami disaster of December 26, 2004. Our heartfelt condolences are offered to all who visit this site in order to pay their respects to their loved ones.

It is a shrine for all the victims, but especially those who will not be repatriated. I know that visitors often leave wreaths and flowers at that site below their country's name. The wall not only paid tribute to the victims of the tsunami but also to the many efforts of so many different countries that united to help their own and the Thai people in the aftermath of such a disaster. I am extremely proud of the efforts that our country contributed in the context of the international community in the aftermath of such a horrific disaster. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.