

Coronavirus Victoria: ADF assistance repeatedly rejected by Victoria

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Liberal MP says Andrew's persistent claims of ignorance are now 'unbelievable'
Victorian Liberal MP Richard Riordan says “absolutely no one” believes Premier Daniel Andrews anymore when he claims he has no idea what went wrong with Victoria’s management ...



Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner Andrew Crisp. Picture: AAP.

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Victorian authorities rebuffed ADF assistance with compliance in the state’s bungled hotel quarantine program at least half a dozen times, according to defence department records.

A detailed timeline of engagement between six ADF liaison officers stationed at Emergency Management Victoria headquarters and from March 21, and Defence headquarters, shows a standing offer of assistance by ADF personnel in hotels was repeatedly rejected.

The records contradict the version of events conveyed on Wednesday by Premier Daniel Andrews and his Emergency Management Commissioner Andrew Crisp, who says he neither sought nor was offered ADF assistance with the hotel quarantine program during crucial planning meetings on March 27 and 28.

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The detailed records come as The Australian has also confirmed that no Andrews government ministers, nor their staff, were present at a March 27 meeting of multiple agencies chaired by Mr Crisp, at which the fateful decision was made to engage private security guards rather than ADF personnel or police to ensure compliance in hotel quarantine.

Far from exonerating the Andrews government, the revelation prompts questions over chains of command and accountability for a scheme which Mr Andrews has conceded is to blame for a significant proportion if not all of Victoria's deadly second wave of coronavirus.

Andrews backs emergencies head

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Earlier, Mr Andrews backed a statement from his Emergency Management commissioner, contradicting Defence Minister Linda Reynolds's claims that the state knocked back the Commonwealth's offer of Australian Defence Force assistance with the bungled hotel quarantine system.

Insinuating that Ms Reynolds is someone who "thinks the best thing they could do is play politics" amid the coronavirus pandemic, Mr Andrews backed the short statement from Mr

Crisp, which said he “did not seek, nor did representatives of the ADF offer assistance as part of the hotel quarantine program”.

It came amid a war of words between Mr Andrews and Senator Reynolds, who on Tuesday [directly contradicted Mr Andrews’s evidence to a parliamentary inquiry](#), saying Victorian authorities had refused or ignored multiple offers of ADF assistance.

Breaches in the program resulted in dozens of COVID-19 infections in private security guards, which have been genomically linked to a significant proportion if not all of the second wave of the virus which has claimed 247 deaths since July 5.

While other states used police and ADF personnel for security roles, Victoria hired private security guards.

On Tuesday, Senator Reynolds said Defence approached all states and territories over their need for ADF support with monitoring the compliance of returning travellers, following an offer by Scott Morrison on March 27.

“On 28 March, 2020, Victorian authorities advised that Victoria was not seeking ADF assistance with mandatory quarantine arrangements,” she said.

“The ADF was consistently advised that its assistance was not required for any ‘public-facing roles’ in Victoria.



Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews. Picture:

Andrew Henshaw/NCA NewsWire



Defence Minister Linda Reynolds. Picture:

Brendan Smialowski/AFP

“ADF officials asked whether Victorian authorities required assistance with its mandatory quarantine system on multiple occasions.”

Asked whether he stood by his own comments on Tuesday that it was incorrect that “hundreds of ADF staff” were available to assist with hotel quarantine, in light of Ms Reynolds’s comments, Mr Andrews said: “The Emergency Management Commissioner Andrew Crisp has issued a statement as well, and I would direct you to that.”

“The only quarrel, the only argument, the only fight that I’m engaged in or will ever be engaged in, until this is over, is the fight against this virus,” Mr Andrews said.

“We are deeply grateful to the ADF and the Commonwealth government for the contribution they’re making.

“I can’t speak to statements issued by the Defence Minister. That’s entirely a matter for her.

“But I can — but I can direct you to comments — very clear comments — made by Andrew Crisp.”

Crisp’s statement

Mr Crisp statement earlier on Wednesday said he did not seek ADF assistance as part of the state’s bungled hotel quarantine scheme, but failed to address the fact that he signed off on a request to the federal government for ADF personnel on June 24.

“I can confirm that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were involved in the initial planning of the hotel quarantine program,” Mr Crisp said in his statement.

“Representatives of the ADF participated in the Operation Soteria planning and co-ordination meetings on 27 and 28 March 2020.

“During these discussions I did not seek nor did representatives of the ADF offer assistance as part of the hotel quarantine program.

“Subsequent communications with the ADF on the 12th and 15th of April did not relate to ADF assistance as part of the program.

“As the Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner I am enormously grateful for all of the assistance our colleagues in the Australian Defence Force have provided as we have responded together to the coronavirus pandemic.”

However, Mr Crisp has made no comment about a request he signed on June 24 seeking “personnel augmentation and assistance for (the) Victorian Department of Health and Human Services in the mandatory quarantine of individuals who have returned from overseas (Operation Soteria)”.

Asked about the June 24 request during a Parliamentary Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on Tuesday, Mr Andrews described Mr Crisp as not being “in a position of authority”.

“The question you’re referring to, you’d need to speak to the person who made that request because it was not made by anybody in a position of authority,” Mr Andrews said.

Nationals MP Danny O’Brien interjected, telling Mr Andrews the request had been made by Mr Crisp.

“When he appears before you, you can speak to him,” Mr Andrews said.

“Do you still have full confidence in the Commissioner?” Mr O’Brien asked.

“Absolutely,” Mr Andrews replied.

The Premier said at his later press conference that he had meant that Mr Crisp was not part of the Victorian government.

“He’s not a member of parliament, he’s not a member of the government, in fact you wouldn’t want someone in that role to be either of those things. He’s an independent statutory officer,” Mr Andrews said.