

**SUMMARY OF THE INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE STANDING GROUP ON THE BOAT
TRAGEDY AT CHRISTMAS ISLAND
23 December 2010 (11:30am – 1:00pm) Parliament House Canberra**

Standing Group Members

The Hon Brendan O'Connor, Minister for Home Affairs (Chair)
The Hon Chris Bowen, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
Senator Sarah Hanson-Young
Senator Nick Xenophon
Senator Steve Fielding
The Hon Tony Crook MP

Officials

Mr Duncan Lewis AO, National Security Adviser
Mr Andrew Metcalfe, Secretary, Department of Immigration and Citizenship
Mr Michael Carmody AO, CEO Customs and Border Protection Service
Mr Campbell Darby DSC AM, Director General, Emergency Management Australia
Deputy Commissioner Michael Phelan, Australian Federal Police
Ms Sachi Wimmer, A/g First Assistant Secretary, Prime Minister & Cabinet

The Standing Group on the Boat Tragedy at Christmas Island (Group) met for the first time on 23 December 2010. The Standing Group, chaired by the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon Brendan O'Connor MP, was established to provide a cross-party forum where a broad group of parliamentarians would be briefed by senior officials from the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, Australian Federal Police, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Emergency Management Australia and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet on the facts surrounding the tragic event of 15 December, the Government's response and follow-up activities. The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, the Hon Chris Bowen MP, also participated.

1. Introductory Remarks

Mr O'Connor outlined the purpose and role of the Group, thanking members for their acceptance of the Prime Minister's invitation to join the Group.

National Security Adviser, Mr Duncan Lewis AO, noted the tragic loss of life in the incident, while commending the hard work of agencies across the Commonwealth in responding to the tragedy and the WA state authorities on their close and continuing cooperation with the Commonwealth.

2. Chronology of On-Water Events

Customs and Border Protection CEO, Mr Michael Carmody AO, provided members with a chronology of events from the initial notification of the incident through to the end of the search and rescue phase of the operation. Mr Carmody noted that all the information on the chronology was preliminary and subject to confirmation on the completion of the Customs and Border Protection Review (see Item 8).

3. Search and Rescue Operation

Mr Carmody noted that treacherous sea conditions on the day of the incident had made the rescue effort particularly challenging. He confirmed that current information indicated that the vessel had not been sighted until just before relevant authorities were notified of its existence. In this respect, he noted the difficulty of radar detection of small vessels in heavy seas. He confirmed that the search and rescue operation, coordinated by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, had continued until late on 17 December, at which point, it was suspended on expert advice that it was unlikely more survivors would be found. At that point, the final survivor count remained at 42.

4. AFP Investigation

AFP Deputy Commissioner, Michael Phelan, noted that AFP had coordinated the on-shore response and subsequent recovery phase, which had run for a further two days following the suspension of the search and rescue. The recovery phase had yielded a further two bodies bringing the total deceased recovered to 30. He noted that numbers lost were likely to be higher based on survivor interviews and liaison with family members who had come forward in both Indonesia and Australia, but it was likely precise numbers would never be known.

Deputy Commissioner Phelan also noted that AFP had a sizeable contingent on the Island involved in the criminal investigation and disaster victim identification (DVI) process. The DVI process was well advanced, but would take time to complete, given the exacting standards required to confirm identity. The AFP was endeavouring to keep concerned relatives, and others who had come forward with concerns about family, closely informed of progress on identification.

Deputy Commissioner Phelan further noted that the criminal investigation was progressing. AFP officers were in close liaison with Indonesian counterparts and had questioned the Indonesian crew who were among the survivors.

5. Response of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC)

DIAC Secretary, Mr Andrew Metcalfe, explained that DIAC's role had commenced as the survivors were brought ashore, at which point they were immediately taken into immigration custody and care. All remained on Christmas Island, apart from six people who were evacuated to Perth for medical treatment. The majority of survivors were Iranian, with the next largest group of Iraqi nationality. The survivors were assisting in identifying the deceased.

Mr Metcalfe explained that the welfare of the survivors remained the priority, with the continuing provision of appropriate care. The survivors were grouped together to help them deal with the tragedy. He advised there were three orphaned minors, two of whom were cousins and had since been reunited with relatives. The third orphan has now been reunited with aunts who arrived on a subsequent vessel.

Mr Metcalfe noted that initial asylum seeker processing for the survivors had commenced. Decisions about their accommodation arrangements will continue to be based on expert advice on what is appropriate.

6. Other Operational Response Elements

The Director-General of Emergency Management Australia, Mr Campbell Darby DSC AM, explained his agency's role in coordinating whole-of government support for the emergency response and maintaining situational awareness across government. EMA also provided the link between

supporting Commonwealth agencies and the WA authorities, including in relation to medical evacuations and logistics.

7. Support for Christmas Island Community

Mr Darby also noted that the Christmas Island Administrator, Mr Brian Lacy, had kept the Christmas Island community informed and had chaired several meetings of the Christmas Island Emergency Management Group. Discussions were under way on the timing of a community memorial service which islanders wanted delayed to maximise their participation in the New Year. Counselling and trauma support services had been put in place for the benefit of local residents who had witnessed the incident or been involved in the response.

Mr O'Connor noted that he was in regular contact with Mr Lacy and had had the opportunity to communicate directly with community members during his visit to the Island in the wake of the tragedy. He noted that many locals had displayed great courage in the rescue effort.

8. Customs and Border Protection Review

Mr Carmody said that Customs and Border Protection internal Review currently underway aimed to identify the chain of events and timelines in relation to the incident and assess whether there were immediate remedial actions that could be taken by Customs and Border Protection, including Border Protection Command and related assets. He noted that it was being conducted so that it did not impinge on the Coronial Inquest or Police investigation.

9. Coroner's Inquest

Deputy Commissioner Phelan noted AFP's cooperative relationship with the WA Police and the Coroner's office and said he expected that cooperation to continue. The timing for completion of the Coronial Inquest was a matter for the Coroner.

Closing Remarks

Mr O'Connor noted the various questions raised by Standing Group members and undertook to provide responses as soon as possible. Members acknowledged the value of the meeting and it was agreed that the next meeting take place in January 2011, subject to the availability of members and key officials.
