



**Australian
BORDER FORCE**

REAR ADMIRAL JUSTIN JONES CSC, RAN
COMMANDER JOINT AGENCY TASK FORCE OPERATION SOVEREIGN BORDERS
COMMANDER MARITIME BORDER COMMAND
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE

Opening Statement

Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
Budget Estimates Hearing

Tuesday, 23 May 2023

Good Morning Chair and Committee members. I am Rear Admiral Justin Jones, Commander of Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders and Commander of Maritime Border Command.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee with an opening statement.

I would like to commence by expressing my condolences to the Indonesian Government and to the families of those Indonesian mariners recently caught in the path of Cyclone Ilsa, some of whom tragically lost their lives. Maritime Border Command was pleased to be able to assist in the safe return of the surviving mariners to their families.

In my dual roles as Commander of Operation Sovereign Borders and Maritime Border Command, I lead the Australian Government's operational response to detect, deter and respond to illegal activities in the Australian Maritime Domain.

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These include maritime people smuggling activities targeting Australia, under the remit of Operation Sovereign Borders, but also extend to maritime terrorism, bio-security threats, the exploitation of our natural resources and other civil maritime security threats.

Before I speak in more detail about Operation Sovereign Borders, I would like to acknowledge the 619 members of the Australian Border Force and Australian Defence Force, force assigned to Maritime Border Command, including the 453 currently at sea. Their diligent work – all day, every day – in support of Australia’s civil maritime security is not always publicly acknowledged, but is a vital contribution to Australia’s national security.

Operation Sovereign Borders is a mature and scalable model. The various levers of Operation Sovereign Borders, including surveillance and response assets and personnel, can be surged - as has been the case across recent months, or equally, moderated, to meet the extant maritime people smuggling threat.

To ensure we are positioned appropriately to effect an operational response commensurate to the assessed threat, we continuously monitor for indications of changing maritime people smuggling intent and capability.

Across my tenure, I have commanded Operation Sovereign Borders through a sustained period of heightened operational tempo, driven

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in large part by global and regional geopolitical factors, including the ongoing socio-economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

Between May 2022 and March 2023¹, the sixteen agencies contributing to the Joint Agency Task Force worked collaboratively to support the successful interception of eight maritime people smuggling ventures that were attempting to reach Australia.

All 209 persons on-board these ventures were safely returned to their country of origin or their country of departure, in accordance with all domestic and international laws.

To deliver the Operation Sovereign Borders mission, agencies within the Joint Agency Task Force work cooperatively across three key lines of effort:

- Disruptions and deterrence;
- Detection, interception and transfer; and
- Regional processing, resettlement and returns.

The Government has renewed its commitment to regional processing in Nauru by redesignating the Republic as a regional processing country. Importantly, Australia's arrangement with Nauru provides a capability that is in a constant state of readiness to receive new arrivals.

¹ To align with Senate Estimates statistical cut off for reporting period to 31 March 2023.

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The Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders continues to deploy proactive and enduring offshore deterrence messaging designed to disrupt maritime people smuggling, deter irregular maritime travel to Australia and preserve safety of life at sea. This is currently operationalised through the highly effective 'Zero Chance' strategic communication campaign.

A combination of Australian Border Force and Australian Defence Force aerial and maritime assets are always postured to detect and intercept maritime people smuggling ventures in Australia's key maritime threat corridors, and respond rapidly.

We recognise that maritime people smuggling is a challenge that cannot be effectively countered by any single country working in isolation. Members of the Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders continue to work closely with a range of regional partners, to combat maritime people smuggling and suppress the efforts of people smugglers willing to attempt to circumvent legal migration pathways.

We deeply appreciate the continued efforts of Sri Lankan authorities to both successfully disrupt attempted ventures in-country and for their ongoing assistance to facilitate the safe return of Sri Lankan nationals intercepted at sea by Australian authorities.

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I would also like to acknowledge that in Indonesia, the Indonesian National Police have recently made a number of significant arrests of people smugglers operating in their country.

We place great importance on our relationships with our regional partners, who are all making valuable contributions to disrupt the people smuggling trade and save people's lives.

People smugglers will continue targeting vulnerable populations for financial gain. We know through experience that people smugglers constantly monitor the global, regional and domestic environment, spreading mis-information and dis-information – in fact outright lies – to increase demand for their services.

Over the years, people smugglers have consistently sought to exploit socio-economic uncertainty and political instability in source countries, as well as changes in Australia's domestic political landscape, to sell unlawful, dangerous sea passages that risk the lives of those on-board.

As the Commander of Operation Sovereign Borders and Maritime Border Command, and as a mariner, my commitment to preserving safety of life at sea is unwavering. It is almost nine years since the last successful people smuggling venture to Australia, and more than eight years since the last known death at sea from maritime people smuggling ventures *en route* to Australia.

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Operation Sovereign Borders will continue to deliver on its mission through integrated cross-government operations, strong and sustained international engagement and formidable border response capabilities.

I thank the Committee for its time and welcome any questions.