



**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
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing

Monday, 13 February 2023

Good Afternoon Chair and Committee members. I am Rear Admiral Justin Jones, the Commander of the Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders.

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

I will commence by acknowledging the 26 October 2022 sentencing of Maythem Radhi to seven years jail for his role in a maritime people smuggling operation, known as SIEV X, which resulted in the deaths of 353 vulnerable people, including 140 innocent children, in October 2001.

Radhi and his fellow people smugglers were not motivated by moral purpose. As Justice Crowley observed, Radhi 'for financial reward, [was] involved with a people-smuggling group that sought to exploit desperate people.' This is a timely reminder of the types of tragedy

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and criminal activity the Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders exists to prevent.

Since the last time I addressed this committee in February 2022, there have been a number of important developments in countering maritime people smuggling. Following an extended period of suppressed maritime people smuggling activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, since May 2022 we have experienced a sharp increase in operational tempo.

The ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka has been the biggest driver for maritime people smuggling ventures targeting Australia during this period, with shortages of food, fuel and medicines generating strong push factors for people to leave the country in search of better economic prospects. I recently returned from a visit to Sri Lanka and am pleased that the situation is improving. However, there is a long road ahead to economic recovery.

People smugglers have also sought to exploit the change of the Australian Government, using misinformation centred on the outcome of the May 2022 Federal Election to convince potential irregular immigrants in regional source and transit countries that now is the time to travel to Australia by boat.

Despite the surge in regional people smuggling activity, the integrity of Australia's border has been maintained through the coordinated

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effective efforts and capabilities of all Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders contributing agencies.

Between May and December 2022, Australian authorities have intercepted seven maritime people smuggling vessels attempting to reach Australia.

All 199 people 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.

These actions have clearly demonstrated to people smugglers and potential irregular immigrants that Australia's border protection policies have not changed.

The Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders remains postured to counter maritime people smuggling, and preserve safety of life at sea.

We will continue to detect and intercept anyone who attempts an irregular boat voyage to Australia and return them to their country of departure or country of origin, where it is safe and lawful to do so.

People who cannot be safely returned to their home country or country of departure will be transferred to regional processing in Nauru, where protection claims will be assessed by the Government of Nauru.

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We also continue to focus on upstream effects to counter maritime people smuggling. This includes deterring people from joining illegal maritime people smuggling ventures, and disrupting ventures in source and transit countries before they reach Australian waters.

We continue to deliver targeted and persistent deterrence messaging to vulnerable people offshore in regional countries that may be at greater risk of exploitation by people smugglers.

This messaging is delivered through a range of channels, including digital and traditional media. Following a number of attempted ventures to Australia in 2022, I also directly met with community leaders in Australia, Sri Lanka and India, to ensure those vulnerable people are aware of Australia's border protection policies, and the legal migration pathways available to them.

We also make people aware of the risks of attempting dangerous maritime voyages across the open ocean, and the criminal disregard that people smugglers have for their welfare. In all deterrence messaging, our highest priority is protecting lives at sea.

A key element of this messaging is the highly effective 'Zero Chance' strategic communications campaign. Since the campaign's launch in May 2019 to 31 December 2022, the digital component of the campaign has reached more than 164 million people across eleven

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key source and transit countries, and helped to dissuade many from engaging in maritime people smuggling activity.

Our offshore deterrence approach is supported by ongoing engagement with regional law enforcement and security partners to build capacity and to disrupt people smuggler networks and activities at the source. Our relationships offshore remain strong – delivering great benefits for Australia’s maritime security.

Of note, our ‘gold standard’ partnership with Sri Lankan authorities has been particularly critical since the start of the Sri Lankan economic crisis. Despite the many challenges of the economic crisis, we have highly valued their efforts to both successfully disrupt attempted ventures in-country and to assist in the safe return of the 183 Sri Lankan nationals intercepted at sea by Australian authorities in 2022.

In addition to Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders, Maritime Border Command continues to maintain a strong surveillance and response capability.

A combination of Australian Border Force and Australian Defence Force assets are postured to detect and intercept maritime people smuggling ventures and other civil maritime security threats 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. I commend all of our people on patrol right

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now and throughout the year at sea, on land and in the air, for the challenging mission they continue to perform.

As at 31 December 2022, it has been almost nine years since the last successful people smuggling venture to Australia, and more than nine years since the last known death at sea from maritime people smuggling ventures *en route* to Australia.

We will continue to preserve Australia's civil maritime security, and seek to ensure safety of life at sea through maximised collaboration across government, strong international engagement and formidable border response capabilities.

I thank the Committee for its time and welcome any questions