



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

DEPUTY SECRETARY

20 June 2011

Mr Tim Watling
Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Watling

**DIAC Response to Questions Taken on Notice at the Joint Select Committee
on the Christmas Island Tragedy at the 27 May 2011 Hearing**

I am writing to advise you of the Department's response to the questions taken on notice at the Joint Select Committee hearing on the Christmas Island Tragedy on 27 May 2011.

The questions taken on notice and the Department's response are included in Attachment A. If the committee would like additional information or further questions answered please contact Charlie Eichholzer, Executive Officer for Deputy Secretary Moorhouse, on

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the committee with additional information.

Yours sincerely

Greg Kelly
First Assistant Secretary, Detention Operations Division
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

people our business

Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy
DIAC's Reponse to Questions Taken on Notice – 27 May 2011

1. Communication to CI community – Provide specific details of the communication that was undertaken, when and the means by which it was undertaken.

The Department commenced formal communications around the events of SIEV 221 on 15 December 2010, the day of the tragedy.

A counselling service for the Christmas Island community was established at the Poon San Grove, utilising staff from the Employee Assistance Program, within two hours of the tragedy occurring. Notification of the availability of this service was provided using the Christmas Island blackboards, an established mechanism for communication on Christmas Island.

A Community Reference Group (CRG) meeting was held on 16 December 2010 at the Christmas Island Recreation Centre. Printed Community Updates were distributed via the local newspaper, The Islander, and contact details for the Department's Community Contact Officer and the Community Liaison Officer were provided in this publication.

A series of special Community Updates and Bulletins about the SIEV 221 tragedy commenced on 18 December 2010. These were distributed through the established communication channels.

2. Formal Medical Advice & the Memorial Service – Was there any formal advice sought, in making a decision, from a psychological, psychiatric or mental health point of view, in how it would/wouldn't help survivors if they attended the community memorial or interacted with the CI community.

The Department works closely with our health service provider, International Health and Medical Services (IHMS), to provide a range of health services to clients, including those involved in the SIEV 221 tragedy.

Following this tragedy, the Department sought advice from a range of expert medical professionals and through IHMS, the Department engaged Recovre who are an external crisis management specialist trauma team. Recovre was deployed to Christmas Island to assist with the immediate needs of the SIEV 221 survivors.

Acting on advice from Recovre, DIAC met with Serco and community representatives within the Asylum Seekers group to facilitate a private memorial service that was conducted in December 2010. Recovre noted that the "memorial service appeared to have an important settling effect on the client group and by that evening they appeared more settled as a group".

The Department continually receives advice from health professionals to ensure the well-being of clients, including those affected by the SIEV 221 tragedy. Throughout

January and February 2011 several mental health professionals and specialists, including an adult, and child/adolescent psychiatrists visited the Island.

The Department has followed the recommendations on the management of these clients and has implemented ways to improve their mental and physical well-being, including appropriate client placement, ongoing case management and support.

IHMS has noted that “in general the group has done well after initial intense grieving”. IHMS continues to provide extensive support and counselling, both individually and in groups. In conjunction with the Department’s case managers, IHMS continue to monitor the well-being of the survivors closely.

3. Community Liaison Officer and Survivor visits – Is the Department aware of any requests from the CI community, between the tragedy and the memorial in March, for meetings to be facilitated with the victims of the tragedy [the survivors].

The Department is aware of one formal request from the Christmas Island community to visit the survivors of the SIEV 221 tragedy. The request came from Ms Michelle Dimasi. The request was facilitated by the Department and Ms Dimasi proceeded to visit these clients on several occasions.

Had similar formal requests come from other members of the Christmas Island community, then these would have been favourably considered by the Department.

4. Offers of Assistance from CI Community – Were there any offers of assistance made by the community to reach out to people who had been affected and were there any obstacles that stopped this from occurring.

The Department understands that a ‘Survivor Fund’ was created at the Westpac Bank Branch on Christmas Island in the week of the incident that accepted community donations for the survivors. This fund continues to be current and is awaiting acquittal.

The Department also understands that there was a local community toy drive where people sent various toys, stationary and books to the Asylum Seekers Christmas Island for distribution to the survivor children of SIEV 221. Six bags of goods were collected and distributed to children at the Phosphate Hill site.

The Department notes the generosity of the Christmas Island community and welcomed this indirect support for the survivors of this tragedy.

5. Correspondence from Ms Dimasi – Can the Department explain why they have not responded to Ms Dimasi’s two correspondence [one dated 19 December]. The correspondence were written requests to Ms Fiona Andrew.

As Commonwealth lead on Christmas Island, Ms Andrew communicated with a range of stakeholders about the events arising from the SIEV 221 tragedy. In that context Ms Andrew was in regular phone and personal contact with Ms Dimasi and others to provide updates on the changing situation around SIEV 221 matters and in particular, respond to related queries and concerns raised by stakeholders.

This ongoing, regular and personal communication strategy enabled stakeholders to directly engage the Department and clarify information around issues related to the SIEV 221 incident.

6. Decisions around the Memorial Service – What steps did the Department take? What particular advice was there on the different cultural ways for expressing and managing grief? And why might the CI community have had such different expectations regarding the attendance of the survivors at the community memorial.

A service was conducted for clients in immigration detention on Christmas Island on 20 December 2011. An Imam was present at this service. When planning for the details around the service, the Department consulted with a range of people about how to proceed, including the Detention Service Provider's religious advisor who was well placed to provide advice on how to manage this unusual situation.

Our advice was that the Christmas Island community was divided on the issue of whether survivors should attend the memorial service on 20 December 2011. The Department is not in a position to comment on why this may be the case.

Both the Christmas Island Shire President and Ms Dimasi raised the idea of extending an invitation to survivors to attend the memorial service, however neither party made formal approaches to the Department to facilitate this.

Invitations to attend the service were extended by the Christmas Island Administrator and our understanding is that there was no formal invitation extended to the survivors of the tragedy.