

## **Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy**

### **Shire of Christmas Island Submission**

This submission addresses two of the terms of the terms of reference for this inquiry:

- (d) the after-incident support provided to survivors;
- (e) the after-incident support provided to affected Christmas Island community members, Customs, Defence and other personnel.

#### **(d) After-incident support provided to survivors**

The Shire, community organisations and individuals have not been significantly involved in after-incident support to survivors after 15 December 2010. These support services have been provided by DIAC and DIAC's contracted professional service providers. All of the survivors were accommodated in the detention centre facilities after the rescue and recovery operation was completed on 15 December 2010.

#### **15 December 2010**

On the day the *Janga* (SIEV221) was dashed on the cliffs, many local people tried desperately to save the passengers. One man was helped from the boat onto the rocks. One saved. [Photo provided by *The West Australian*, 15 December 2010]

The people on the rocks threw life-jackets into the water. Survivors have said none of them would have survived if the life-jackets had not been thrown into the water for them.

Throughout the day the volunteer organisations; SES, Fire-fighters, St John's ambulance, and individuals joined with the Police and health professionals in the search, rescue and care of survivors. DIAC, Serco, IHMS staff all joined in the volunteer effort assisting and comforting the survivors.

The extraordinary bravery of the navy and customs boat crews saved the 42 lives that were saved.

A bank account at the Westpac Bank on Christmas Island was established for donations to be deposited for the benefit of the survivors of the boat tragedy. This account was established by two local women, Khaliesha Amin and Joy Wickenden. All proceeds of sale of the footage of the boat crash made by the film-makers, Philip Stewart and Davud Karadag who were on site that morning, have been deposited in this fund.

#### **After 15 December**

Asylum-seeker advocates have established and maintained communication with some of the survivors. Support was particularly necessary during the contentious discussion

about the funerals conducted on the mainland and the return of the survivors to Christmas Island after the funerals. The advocacy is ongoing work.

### **Sunday 19 December 2010**

#### **Closed ceremony at Phosphate Hill - prayers for the deceased**

A ceremony was conducted at the Phosphate Hill Detention Centre for the people who perished when the *Janga* sank. It was a closed ceremony for survivors and asylum-seekers in detention at Phosphate Hill.

DIAC Assistant Secretary Fiona Andrew asked for limited community representation at the ceremony. The ceremony was conducted by some of the detainees and five members of the Christmas Island Islamic community including Imam Gaffar Ismail, his assistant Imam and three members of the Islamic Council of Christmas Island, J Low, Mohammad and Ahmad Asbi. I attended with Shire Deputy President Foo Kee Heng, Michelle Dimasi, Sister Joan Kelleher of the Sisters of Mercy and the Jesuit refugee service, Father John Turner, Kate Jones from the Red Cross and Fiona Andrew of DIAC.

#### **(f) After-incident support provided to affected Christmas Island community members, Customs, Defence and other personnel.**

Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor arrived on the Island in the afternoon of 15 December. He met with the emergency management committee and volunteers who had assembled at the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service shed. He pledged the fullest support of government to help the community through the tragedy. Material support and replacement of equipment followed fairly quickly after his visit.

We took immediate advice about counselling services that would be necessary, their nature and when the services would be available.

On 15 December DIAC made their counsellor, Rob Naylor, available for walk-in counselling at Poon Saan for those involved in the rescue operation. Notice was circulated in a community bulletin out of the Administrator's office. Sean Devine, senior torture and trauma counsellor at the Christmas Island Health Service assumed responsibility for all community counselling services. All agencies seemed to have teams of counsellors on the Island by Friday 17 December.

Serco set up a triage point at the Perth Airport to meet Serco staff leaving the Island.

A leaflet, *Helping yourself after a traumatic event*, was circulated by the Health Service.

DIAC Community updates were circulated re counselling services and other information.

Advice received indicates that people who were witness to the destruction of the *Janga* SIEV 221 and the death of many passengers will be most affected by the event.

Some may be traumatised by their recollections for the rest of their lives. Counselling services should be available on an ongoing basis for this reason.

A decision to hold a community memorial service was taken. We were advised that it should not be held on site of crash if survivors were to attend. Our planning assumed that survivors would attend. The date of 5 March 2011 was set for the memorial service. This date allowed for time to pass rather than conducting a service immediately following the event as advised. It also allowed the traditional Christmas and Chinese New Year rituals and holidays to pass and for local people to return to the Island to participate in the ceremony.

Discussions between the Shire and DAIC leading up to the memorial on 5 March covered the issue of attendance of survivors. I and many of our community including particularly some of the volunteer rescuers were keen for survivors to attend. Over several days DIAC's advice changed from the survivors would be transferred off the Island before the event, then they would be here and DAIC would facilitate attendance. Finally in the couple of days before the memorial Fiona Andrew advised that she was advised the best of interest of the survivors would not be served by their attendance and that this was advice from her medical team.

On 23 February Fiona Andrew arranged for me to meet [redacted] was a survivor of the tragedy and [redacted] was already here but he lost his wife and son on the *Janga*. We expected that [redacted] and [redacted] would not be on the Island at the time of the memorial. They wished to record their appreciation of the support they had received from Christmas Island people and DIAC. I met [redacted] and [redacted] with Kaye Bernard, Chris Su and Fiona Andrew. It was a very emotional meeting. I prepared their statements from our meeting and read them at the ceremony. [refer to *The Islander* record of the memorial]

At the memorial on 5 March this year, Zainal Majid said he recalls the event, sees the faces of the children on the deck of the boat, hears their cries for help, every day. He wept continuously throughout his speech. Yesterday he told me that he does not think about the events of 15 December every day now, but often enough not to forget. His greatest comfort is his family and his readings of the Koran.

At the time of the tragedy expert opinion indicated that people affected by this tragedy should have access to counselling from professional counsellors. We had many come to Christmas Island for this purpose.

And we were told that the most beneficial form of counselling or recovery from such tragedies is to be had in the day to day coping mechanism in our relationships - talking to family, friends and colleagues and the comfort to be had from religious convictions and the practices and rituals of religious expression. Reading the Koran helps Zainal.

Debriefing immediately after participating in the rescue and recovery operation on the day was probably very important for the volunteer teams and the professionals who were responsible for the conduct of the operation, people such doctors, nurses, navy, police and customs officers.



Others have had to leave the Island and take formal professional counselling in Perth. For example one of the volunteer rescue workers went to Perth to receive counselling provided by FESA for the volunteers on Christmas Island.

Soon after the incident, many people left the Island for their annual holidays. For instance my friend Zainal left for his five week holiday two days after the tragedy. He was a leader of the volunteer rescue group.

After the memorial service Michelle Dimasi, KUni Takeshima, Fiona Andrew, Janet Mackin and I distributed flowers to survivors and other detainees at the Phosphate Hill detention centre.

## ATTACHMENT 1

Extract - Report of Memorial for the *Janga* (SIEV 221) *The Islander*

### **SIEV 221 *Janga* Memorial**

The memorial for those lost on 15 December was conducted at the recreation centre on Saturday 5 March. The memorial ceremony was followed by a procession to Tampa View where flowers were laid at the cliff side memorial. Warren Snowdon MP and Senator Trish Crossin represented the Australian Government at the memorial. Several speakers addressed the assembled residents and visitors.

### **Warren Snowdon**

*We are honoured to be present today on behalf of the Australian government to acknowledge and thank the Christmas Island community for your efforts in the aftermath of the crash of the SIEV 221.*

*From all accounts the community, emergency personnel, and Australian Government workers showed courage, leadership and resourcefulness to help those in the tragic emergency on 15 December.*

*The circumstances were diabolical – terrible weather conditions, the port at Flying Fish Cove closed and none of the locally based vessels could be launched.*

*I can only imagine the sense of helplessness you must have experienced wanting to save these people but being powerless to support the emergency effort except through land based support.*

*The rocky landscape where this occurred is also notoriously razor sharp – meaning even land based support was fraught.*

*I want to commend the skills and bravery of Border Protection command personnel involved in the rescue effort. Together with the community they put their lives at risk to save 42 people.*

*I know it is not much consolation to say that without your efforts the number of casualties would have been much higher – but speaking on behalf of the Australian community we express our heartfelt thanks.*

### **Brian Lacy**

*The events of 15 December represent one of the worst tragedies ever witnessed on Christmas Island. Our community can be proud of their own efforts, the efforts of our Navy and Customs personnel and the efforts of our doctors and hospital staff and the members of the police and emergency services. You have all shown courage, leadership and the spirit of resilience that can only be known in remote localities like Christmas Island.*

*Christmas Island is place where displaced persons; people made homeless by terrifying and horrific acts of inhumanity, can find safety and care. We are in that unique part of the world that can provide safe harbour to people who, driven from their homeland, want to be Australian. We are able to care for asylum seekers and refugees and we do our best to do just that.*

*We did our best on 15 December 2010, and I believe I can say, ... that nothing more could have been done on that day to help the victims of the tragic event. Nonetheless, as Chair of the Emergency Management Committee I will ensure that consideration is given to ways in which our response to and recovery from such events might be improved.*

*I am proud to stand here amongst you today; proud to say that Joan and I are members of a community that receives and cares for the asylum seekers who choose to come to our shore, despite the many challenges that confront them. I am proud of our police and emergency services, our doctors and hospital staff and you the members of our community. Some of your actions are deserving of bravery awards and all of you are deserving of commendation. I will take such steps as I am able to secure the awards and commendations.*

**Gordon Thomson** read two messages from

came to Christmas Island on another boat. He lost his wife and son and his brother and his brother's wife when the *Janga* (SIEV221) sank. He is caring for his orphaned nephew.

was on the *Janga* (SIEV 221). He lost his brother and his brother's wife. He is caring for his orphaned nephew. wife and son were in group on the *Janga*.

*I don't know how to bring forward my feelings and thoughts to you. It's amazing that people who live together here have such a big heart and that everyone tried their best to help other humans. This is not just me saying this to you. It's my family, my*

*relatives over there in Iran and here in the camp. Here on Christmas Island we have met the kindest people on earth.*

*From my heart I appreciate all your help. I hope this never happens again.*

*Some people, they like to hide the facts, the differences between people cause them to hide the facts.*

*I wish I could talk in your language to Australia and Iran and all countries how it is here, how kind you are.*

*This is an Island in the middle of the whole ocean and facilities might be limited, we appreciate the limited things here, we are grateful. I hope if one day we get the honour to be Australians, we'd like to meet people like you in our life.*

*We lost wife, kids, a lot of people. The huge hole in my heart from that loss has been filled with the kindness of the great people here.*

*We wish we can give our thanks to the whole world about you people. That much effort for a such sudden thing was a lot.*

*We come from the worst place in the world, the worst human acts and we come to you, the most kind. I am so happy to have met people like you. Even if we don't end up staying in Australia, I appreciate meeting you.*

*Anywhere we go the sky is blue, it's the people who make the place beautiful.*  
[Iranian proverb]

*We'll never forget the kindness and help we got from the Christmas Island people.*

*Everyone who is alive, they know they are owing Christmas Island people for their lives, for their lifejackets, their life.*

*None of us would have survived if the people on the cliff had not given us the lifejackets.*

*Some people just heard that we were helped, but I saw it with my eyes. From their heart, they helped us, how much effort they put. I can't make a word sentence, this is too much to appreciate what you have done.*

*We say special thanks for the memorial. Thank you for remembering those we lost and putting your heart next to ours, the sad moments we went through, what a great honour.*

23 February 2011

**Fiona Andrew (DIAC)**

*On 15 December the people of Christmas Island and all the agencies and organisations that are involved in irregular maritime arrivals saw human tragedy the likes of which most people should never have to see. Through it all, though, I saw*

*people put themselves at risk on land and on water to save people. I saw people standing on the rocks attempting to stretch out as far as they could to save people - and I saw the look of despair when, exhausted, they realised they could do no more. I will never forget passing one man, who, with rope over his shoulder, just looked at me and shook his head and another crouched down beside me holding his head in his hands. I saw incredible bravery. And, most of all, I saw the lives of 42 people saved thanks to the efforts of the Customs and Border Protection and Navy and all who stood on the rocks that grey, wet, horrible day.*

*I also saw great tenderness. I saw a frightened young girl wrapped in blankets being carried by a frowning Serco officer and that image on his face of worry, tenderness, compassion and emotion will remain with me forever. I saw men and women just go up to others and hug them ... as all the volunteers and the hospital and Serco officers working so tirelessly at Ethel Beach, looked out for each other as they were caring for those who were saved. Throughout 15 December, I saw love and understanding.*

*I saw people – Christmas Island people and naval officers - making a huge difference to the lives of others. ... Thank you, Christmas Island.*

### **Imam Abdul Gaffar Ismail**

*There is something that we share amongst us, not just as Muslims, but as a Community, as Islanders on Christmas Island, we have something, a unique thing that we can't find in other places that we visit, we are an island that we know that has 'hands helping hands'.*

### **Father Peter Currucan**

*I'd like to offer this simple prayer for those who died; it's a simple prayer and it goes like this:*

*To all of you who died on that fateful day in Dec, may the songs of the angels go with you, may the smiles of the martyrs greet your own, where death is no more and when every tear is wiped away, may the songs of the angel sing new hope before the face of God.*

### **Zainal Majid**

Zainal Majid, President of the Islamic Council, spoke for the SES volunteers.

*15<sup>th</sup> of December is a day that we will never forget easily for the island and the island people and especially for the volunteers.*

*I can not stop seeing the eyes, the faces, of the people on the boat as it was dashed against the rocks, the father desperately clinging to the boat with one hand and with the other clutching his child to his side. Then a child swept from the arms of the mother. It was horrible.*

*We are sorry for the families who have lost their loved ones in their attempt to find a better place to be. On behalf of the Islamic community we are sorry we could not put their loved ones to rest in peace earlier.*

*Everything that happened on that day was beyond our control. Lastly I want to say again that I'm proud to be a volunteer in the rescue teams on the island. I salute again, all the volunteer groups. Keep up the good spirits. I'm proud to be a Christmas Islander.*

**Dr Julie Graham**

*Many people died on that tragic day, but amazingly, many people also survived. The courageous actions of our Navy and Customs and those individuals on that cliff face saved many. The journey these survivors now face is a difficult one and we hope they have the strength to travel it.*

*For all of us on that day, we were there to help. On that day there were no reffoes, no queue-jumpers, no clients, there were just people in need.*

*For the survivors, we feel your tragedy. For the loss, we grieve and for the community of Christmas Island, we should be proud.*

*If you need help, seek support and keep an eye out for those around you.*

**Master of Ceremonies Chris Su** concluded the memorial with a quote from poet John Donne.

*The loss of each person's life diminishes our own, for we are all a part of humankind. All people are of one author, and are of one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language.*



## Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy

Submission by Zhong Xiong SU (Chris SU)  
Community Liaison Officer  
Shire of Christmas Island

On the morning of Wednesday December 15<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at work at the George Fam offices of the Shire of Christmas Island at approximately 7.15am. A co-worker, Susan De Cruz, informed me that her husband Ron De Cruz (SOCI Health and Building Officer as well as SES volunteer) went down to the Police Station to aid an asylum seeker boat which was sinking.

I proceeded down to the Police Station Padang and saw an ambulance pass me on the other side of the road going towards the direction of the hospital. I stopped at the Padang as it overlooked the scene. I saw the two navy boats rescuing people out of the water. I could make out wreckage in the water, the boat had already dashed itself on the rocks by then. I was joined onsite by a teacher from the school. Together we watched the scene unfold till about 7.40am when I proceeded to the Golden Bosun carpark.

At the Bosun carpark, people were gathering large plastic water drums which were to be used in the water if survivors were spotted along the cliffs. The navy boats were not at the Bosun when I arrived. David Nielsen (Works and Services Manager from SOCI) was there directing traffic with his SOCI team. I was informed by David that the navy boats were going to dock at Ethel Beach and that he was going to get there soon after he had finished at the Bosun.

I drove towards Ethel Beach and during so, was overtaken by Azmi Yon of Parks who was driving with a ute full of equipment. I arrived at the intersection of the Ethel Beach trail and Linkwater Road where I saw SOCI worker Thompson who had blocked off access to the road. He said he had been given instructions to not let anyone pass through who did not need to be on site. He asked me if I needed to be there in my role as DIAC Community Liaison Officer, I replied no, I probably wouldn't be of any use in this scenario. I updated Thompson on what I had seen at the Bosun and informed him that David Nielsen was going to be onsite soon. I asked him to continue verifying with people if they needed access to Ethel Beach during the course of the day as I knew that soon there would be many more people coming down who may unwittingly hinder instead of help. At the time there were no other cars about. It was roughly 8.20am.

I drove back to the Shire Offices where I updated Shire CEO Kelvin Matthews on the situation. ABC Radio had picked up the story and were giving sketchy details on the incident. It was roughly 9am. 'Dozens' were reported lost. I asked Kelvin where could we store the bodies on the Island as the Morgue floor could fit in around 15 people. Kelvin suggested that a freezer container was the only place that could fit in people.

I called up DIAC to enquire about the contingency plan to store bodies and was put onto Greg Lake, the then Centre Director who informed me that DIAC were letting AFP take control of the situation and that I did not have to do anything for the incident. It was clear he had not thought of this aspect of the rescue process yet.

Colin Wheadon, Manager of Building and Health at the SOCI had joined Kelvin and I in discussions on how to manage the influx of the recovered bodies. Colin and I decided to drive onsite to the hospital to see how we could be of assistance in terms of providing resources needed to move a freezer sea container connected to the mains power.

At approximately 11am we arrived at the hospital to see that Kheong from Acker Trading was already in the process of setting up a freezer sea container adjacent to the hospital. Colin and I went back to the Shire Office.

In the afternoon, I was notified by DIAC that the onsite psychologist for DIAC staff who usually only does counselling work with DIAC teams and officers was being made available to the wider public who may need to talk about the situation. Extended counselling sessions were to be held at a flat in Poon Saan. DIAC asked me to write a notice on the roundabout chalk boards to advertise the availability of counselling for the next two or three days.

I also made flyers advertising the service and on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> December, began posting them around the island at various public places and shops. I put up more than 20 in all. I also directly approached several individuals who I knew were community first responders and provided them with the details for the service.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> December, I visited the counsellor in the evening as well to debrief. I enquired how many local residents had come to utilise the service and he replied 'very few,' and that it was mostly interpreters from NWP and DIAC staff who were instructed to come in. He informed me that not everyone wants to talk about it so soon, that some may take weeks, if ever. He suggested that the next counsellor (he was due to leave the island soon) consider holding group discussions if it might help more people come forward. I told him that I thought there were at least 100 front line island responders that day from both Bosun and Ethel beach.

Over the next few days, I had meetings with Sean Devine, the psychologist at the hospital who asked me to help get the word out that the hospital was a contact point for people needed help. I assisted the hospital in putting up flyers around the island as by then the DIAC counsellor was no longer available.