

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION SERVICE

Question No. 86

Senator Ronaldson asked the following question at the hearing on 26 May 2011:

- a) Can Customs and Border Protection Confirm the Report in The Age on 18 January 2010 that a boat that left Indonesia on 2 October 2009 carrying 105 Hazaras bound for Australia had disappeared?
- b) Are those 105 Hazaras believed to have drowned?
- c) When did Customs and Border Protection first learn of this incident?
- d) Were any of the people believed to have drowned children?
- e) When were these deaths reported to the Minister or to the Prime Minister?
- f) What steps were taken by the government to prevent further lives of men, women and children being lost on leaky boats on route to Australia in response to these deaths?

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

- a) No
- b) and d) Customs and Border Protection does not know. It is important to note that if Customs and Border Protection receives information that a vessel may have departed for Australia, and it does not arrive, it does not mean it has necessarily been lost at sea. Reports may be received concerning ventures in various stages of preparation which sometimes do not eventuate or depart for Australia.
- c) Following the publication of the report in The Age of 18 January 2010, Customs and Border Protection reviewed its information holdings to ascertain if the agency had any relevant information. This review concluded that information Customs and Border Protection received about a vessel in distress on 3 October 2009 may have referred to this incident. At the time the advice was received in October, Customs and Border Protection advised the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) of a possible distress situation, including possible vessel coordinates. As these coordinates were within the Indonesian search and rescue region, AMSA contacted the Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency, who accepted responsibility for coordinating the search. Every effort was made by Customs and Border Protection and partner Australian and foreign agencies to locate the vessel and verify the information.
- e) A brief on the review of information holdings was provided to the Minister for Home Affairs on 20 January 2010.
- f) Customs and Border Protection undertakes a range of activities to prevent potentially dangerous vessels from departing for Australia and to discourage people from seeking to board such vessels.

Customs and Border Protection coordinates the Australian Government's efforts to combat people smuggling operations – specifically operations which are designed to:

- disrupt people smuggling criminal syndicates;
- discourage potential irregular immigrants from boarding people smuggling vessels; and

- prevent such vessels from leaving foreign shores, using lawful means of collaboration with international partners.

In the past three years, more than 285 ventures involving approximately 7600 potential irregular immigrants have been disrupted and more than 270 arrests have been made offshore.

In addition to coordinating operational activity to stop potentially dangerous vessels from departing, Customs and Border Protection coordinates the implementation of offshore counter-people smuggling communication campaigns to dissuade potential irregular immigrants, potential crew and community members from participating in or facilitating maritime people smuggling activities. Campaign messages highlight the risks and consequences of engaging in irregular migration, including the dangers associated with a high-risk sea voyage to Australia. Discrete counter people smuggling communications campaigns have been conducted or are underway in key source and transit countries, including: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia. These campaigns complement a domestic information strategy – also highlighting the dangers of a risky sea voyage – targeting relevant diaspora communities within Australia which is conducted by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.