

Additional Comments

Senator Crossin

1.1 While I agree with the conclusions reached in the committee report, I would like to make some additional comments in relation to two matters. These are the adequacy of radio communications on the island, and the need for a Community Emergency Management Officer.

Radio communications

1.2 The committee report identified the availability and use of radios, and in particular an inadequate number of handsets and knowledge of procedure, as being issues that impeded effective and efficient communication between agencies on the morning of the tragedy. The committee noted the report provided by Mr Brian Lacy, the Christmas Island Administrator, which recommended better definition and training in relation to radio frequencies and their use, and suggested (among other things) provision of a marine radio at each agency with a dedicated listening officer, and also handheld marine radios to enhance mobility of officers while at the same time keeping them well informed. At the committee's hearing, Mr Lacy also submitted that:

There are black spots around the island with the radios, and that is another matter being investigated at the moment, with the equipment we might need to be able to switch also from UHF to VHF and overcome the problems of black spots with other infrastructure on the island...and we are dealing with Customs and police in trying to get equipment that is common to all agencies on the island and that will provide the relevant frequencies for people to work within their own agency and across agencies... We need some additional infrastructure to overcome the problem of black spots on the island. We need an approach to equipment that is coordinated for all of the agencies on the island so there are not any disruptions to services because of the way we use the frequencies or because of the type of equipment used. That is, as I said, being reviewed at the present time. There were some AFP people on the island recently looking into it, Customs were conducting a review and Regional Australia is also looking at a communications strategy for the island. I in fact asked the director of the Indian Ocean Territories Administration on Christmas Island to see if we could get a communication strategy developed for the island. That has been passed back to Canberra and is being undertaken by a consultant, engaged by the Territories Division, at the present time.¹

1.3 The Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government submitted details of the implementation of Mr Lacy's recommendations,

1 Mr Brian Lacy, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 7 June 2011, pp 3–4.

including the procurement of handheld radios.² However, the committee has received limited information concerning the communications strategy Mr Lacy spoke of, and in particular, whether progress is being made to address black spots in radio coverage. While I welcome the additional radios and other improvements agreed to by the Department, the effectiveness of the radios (in particular) hinges on reliable reception being available on all parts of the island, and eliminating black spots should be a priority.

Recommendation

That, in addition to the implementation of the recommendations of the Emergency Management Committee in its January 2011 report, the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government take all necessary steps to ensure reliable radio coverage is available on all parts of Christmas Island before the end of 2011.

Community Emergency Management Officer

1.4 The committee report rightly commends the community of Christmas Island for its response to the tragedy, and in particular lauds the efforts of volunteers on whom the community relies for so much. While the work of the volunteers is clearly based on a love of their community, I am mindful of the fact that almost all have other commitments, not least of all paid employment on which they rely for their survival. It is important not to place an over-reliance on these generous, community-minded people, and to support them where necessary. This sentiment was most poignantly expressed by Mr Chris Su, who submitted that:

Inadvertently Canberra is asking the CI community to do a lot of things. When they house, at one point, 3,000 asylum seekers on Christmas Island they have to rely on our volunteer firefighting service, our volunteer ambulance drivers and our volunteer marine rescue. We are staffed by volunteers. We all go out to the centre every time if somebody calls for an ambulance. We will go out every time when somebody calls for a fire truck and assistance. But for us to help Canberra look after the people they want us to look after, they need to give us more things to help do the job, even on a voluntary level. We have had more than 200 boats come in, and they know that the CI cliff face is very sharp and very steep. Without them giving us the things to help people with, it is not very fair for us...If [the tragedy] had happened one week later, most of the residents on that part of the island would have been gone and there may not have been anywhere near as much help. If people in Canberra are asking us to help look after their people, if they give us the best equipment to do that, that will be for that best, because the island people will never say no.³

1.5 The committee also heard from Mr Lacy that:

2 Additional information, tabled 27 May 2011.

3 Mr Chris Su, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 7 June 2011, p. 33.

I still believe that we really do need a full-time community emergency management officer because, as you have identified, everybody here is a volunteer—or most people are volunteers—and they all have other jobs. Some people have two jobs, and it is pretty difficult to concentrate or devote the time that is really needed to make sure that everybody is properly trained and that the community are properly informed, and things of that nature.⁴

1.6 The Shire President, Mr Gordon Thomson, submitted that:

...I think that there may be an issue of our extreme isolation, so if things could be better prepared or better organised, given that backup is a long way away, it may be something that would be very worthwhile looking at. We are not on the mainland, you know. We are half an hour away from significant support if we need it, so perhaps there is something in the suggestion that there should be someone.⁵

1.7 I consider that a full-time Community Emergency Management Officer is warranted to service both Christmas and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands. The officer would provide training, develop procedures, coordinate volunteer efforts, oversee the maintenance of equipment, and act as a key point of contact (together with the Australian Federal Police Officer-in-Charge) in emergency situations.

Recommendation

That the Department of Regional Australia immediately establish a full-time Community Emergency Management Officer on Christmas Island, to serve both Christmas and the Cocos Islands.

Senator Trish Crossin

4 Mr Brian Lacy, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 7 June 2011, p. 7.

5 Mr Gordon Thomson, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 7 June 2011, p. 12.