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Commander Joint Agency Task Force – Operation Sovereign Borders

Opening Statement to Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee

Estimates Hearing

Monday, 8th February 2016

OPERATION SOVEREIGN BORDERS

Mr Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on activities under the Operation Sovereign Borders policy since the Supplementary Budget Estimates hearing in October last year.

Operation Sovereign Borders has now been in place for more than 2 years, and it is working as intended. We have seen the successful return of 23 boats and more than 680 people to their country of departure. Most importantly, there have been no known deaths at sea during that period.

We now stand at more than 560 days since the last people smuggling boat successfully arrived in the Australian migration zone, with the individuals on that last venture being transferred to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre.

We have also increasingly strengthened our engagement with regional partners, either bilaterally, or through the multilateral Bali Process.

However, notwithstanding the success of Operation Sovereign Borders to date, we need to remain vigilant. Despite the High Court finding that the Australian Government's arrangements for regional processing on Nauru are legally and constitutionally valid, we know that people smugglers are still trying to use opportunities such as the recent court case to convince vulnerable men, women and children that Australia's policy has changed. This is clearly not the case – there has been no change to the Government's position.

The maintenance of a consistently robust approach to stopping illegal maritime ventures has seen the people smugglers business models all but broken; however, they continue to try to circumvent our border control measures.

We continue to reach out to the people who are thinking about paying people smugglers to enter Australia illegally, to ensure they have a clear understanding of the dangers involved, as well as the nature of Australia's tough policies. These communication initiatives are making it harder for people smugglers to convince those vulnerable people to part with their money and to set out on unsafe journeys. Our communication efforts remain an enduring line of work, because any void in communication will be filled by the misinformation and lies of people smugglers.

The Operation Sovereign Borders system of on-water deterrence remains strong and has been recently reinforced with the addition of the Ocean Protector, the sister ship of the Ocean Shield, which provides significant additional capability to enable the Australian Border Force to respond to immediate and enduring threats to our maritime security and sovereignty. As the Commissioner indicated in his opening statement, the Australian Border Force now operates the largest and most capable maritime surveillance and response fleet Australian civilian authorities have ever fielded.

Finally, I want to again acknowledge the professionalism of the men and women of the Australian Border Force and the Australian Defence Force who work in the challenging and often dangerous on-water environment. I have met many of these men and women, and I am consistently impressed with their attitude, which has typically enabled them to balance the implementation of a tough policy without compromising safety. While many of their efforts are not in the public eye, they have much to be proud for the manner in which they undertake their duties.

Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your indulgence.