



**Australian
BORDER FORCE**

Commissioner

Opening Statement to Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee Estimates Hearing Monday, 8 February 2016

Introduction

It has now been 7 months since the establishment of the Australian Border Force. I explained to the committee in October last year that the ABF's operational remit is an amalgamation of the operational functions of the former Customs Service and the former Immigration Department and I outlined some of the ABF's operational priorities at that time.

Good progress against those operational priorities is being made. On the back of record drug seizures of 7.3 tonnes last year the ABF continues to make significant detections of major drugs, predominantly methamphetamine – or ice – at Australia's border.

For example, only last month in a joint operation with the AFP and the NSW Police we seized 500 kg of methamphetamine and precursor chemicals arriving in three sea cargo containers from China into Port Botany. This size of this seizure illustrates the continuing threat of methamphetamine importation to Australia's community.

Another example is the work of our Counter Terrorist Unit teams across Australia's international airports. We have increased the number of CTU officers from 80 to 100, and their primary role is to assist security and intelligence agencies by monitoring and intercepting persons from travelling to unlawfully participate in foreign conflicts, and to manage those persons seeking to return to Australia from conflict arenas.

In the first seven months of this financial year our CTU officers have:

- Spoken to and assessed almost 110,000 inbound and outbound passengers resulting in 315 off-loads;
- Recorded 1100 outcomes from those actions including referrals to security and intelligence partners and the collection of intelligence; and
- Detected more than \$3 million in undeclared currency

I will outline more detailed progress against ABF operational priorities to the committee as the year advances, however, I want use the remainder of this opportunity to briefly update the committee on a number of organisational reforms which I made reference to during last October's hearings.

Immigration Detention - Onshore

The committee may recall the ABF's assumption of responsibility for the management of onshore immigration detention facilities on 1 July last year. It is our assessment that the network of detention facilities, processes and general operations, was not appropriate to optimally manage the changing cohort and new complexities arising from the 2000 detainees we have responsibility for in our onshore detention network at any given point in time.

We have therefore embarked on a substantial remediation program to improve the security, safety and amenity of these operations. Deputy Commissioner – Operations, Michael Outram, can provide more detail of this comprehensive reform program, however, I will provide some examples of the improvement program to give the committee a sense of the scale of the improvements:

- a review and remediation program to improve the safety, security and amenity of all facilities;
- compulsory training courses for ABF officers at detention centres which incorporate input and delivery from NGOs and oversight bodies such as:
 - the Australian Human Rights Commission;
 - the Commonwealth Ombudsman;
 - the Ministerial Council on Asylum Seekers in Detention; and
 - the Child Protection Panel
- all detention operating policies and practices are being comprehensively overhauled and re-written;

- developing new risk assessment tools and alternative community monitoring mechanisms with a view to using held detention as a last resort and reducing the number of detainees in the network;
- newly appointed detention specialist Superintendents at all facilities as the single point of accountability, reporting ultimately to the ABF Deputy Commissioner of Operations;
- introduction of a national decision-making model for placements of detainees into the network; and
- working with our service providers, primarily SERCO and IHMS, to improve standards in the delivery of security, medical and recreational services across the entire network.

So, we are on an improvement path, but much is still left to be done in this area which is inherently challenging as is evidenced by the disturbance at the North-West Point facility on Christmas Island in November last year. While we regained control of that facility within 36 hours, our review of the circumstances leading up to the disturbance recommended a number of improvements in security operations at the centre, all of which are in the process of being implemented as a component of our broader reform of network operations.

Maritime Capabilities

The last few months have seen the ABF complete the establishment of our maritime patrol fleet. In December we completed the build and commissioning program for our new Cape Class fleet, with the eighth and final vessel coming into service. These purpose-built vessels, constructed in Fremantle, provide us with superior range, speed, endurance, passenger carrying capacity, and state-of-the-art communications in the execution of our maritime responsibilities.

In conjunction with the completion of our large hull vessel the Ocean Shield, and a full complement of aerial surveillance assets, we now operate the largest and most capable maritime surveillance and response fleet Australian civilian authorities have ever fielded – one which is able to be deployed rapidly and efficiently from the new ABF berthing facility and marine base which we opened recently at the East Arm Wharf in Darwin.

Working in partnership with Defence under the auspice of ABF's Maritime Border Command we have achieved substantial operational successes in Australia's maritime domain both in Operation Sovereign Borders in countering illegal maritime people-smuggling and against other civilian maritime threats, particularly illegal foreign fishing where we have undertaken a number of successful disruption missions.

Airports

In the first six months of this financial year we have processed more than 20 million passengers through Australia's airports confirming our forecast of continued and substantial growth in passenger volumes. The recent Christmas period saw a record 3.5 million air passengers arrive and depart across our border.

In response to this volume challenge we are both injecting additional processing officers into the airports and implementing technological solutions for improved, seamless, automated processing of passengers. This financial year we have recruited an additional 225 officers to undertake frontline operational work, all of whom have been trained in airport processing and will be directed to undertake this work as required. We have also invested heavily in the installation of SmartGates.

At Sydney airport for example, working in partnership with the Sydney Airport Corporation, we have just completed the installation of the largest bank of automated departure SmartGates existing anywhere in the world. At the outbound departure point at this airport an outbound passenger will see a line of 24 SmartGates each of which can read both e-chip and non e-chip passports for self-help passenger processing.

These gates are processing passengers at a cycle rate of 25 seconds and for the month of January they cleared more than 500,000 passengers at Sydney airport without a hitch. The gates are now actively being installed in Brisbane and Melbourne airports, and by the end of this calendar year, we will have over 90 outbound departure SmartGates installed across our airport network.

Workforce

We continue to invest in developing the capability of the ABF's 6000-strong workforce. Examples of that investment are:

- Since 1 July, six Border Force officer training courses have commenced and several of those have recently graduated from the ABF College as the first cohort of ABF officers who are able to be flexibly deployed across both Customs and Immigration functions;
- We are rolling out mobile devices to our frontline officers to enable them to upload and download data in the field as opposed to being tethered to their office desks; and
- We are harnessing and building specialist teams to focus on border related enforcement activity – such as the joint taskforce created with the Fair Work Ombudsman, Taskforce Cadena, to combat the exploitation of working holiday makers in Australia; and Operation Balneary, which is focussed on the removal of unlawful non-citizens from the community.

Collaboration

Of course, no ABF activity happens without collaboration with international and domestic partners, industry and the public.

We have an active international engagement program. Our recent signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Thailand Office of the Narcotics Control Board to share intelligence on the movement of drugs across international borders, particularly from South-East Asia to Australia; and operational collaboration with Papua New Guinea to combat illegal fishing and indentured labour in the regional fishing industry, are two examples of this engagement.

Domestically we have established strong partnerships with enforcement agencies with 37 ABF officers out-posted to policing entities, taskforces and joint operations.

An illustration of the effectiveness of these arrangements is a taskforce which has achieved the cancellation (or refusal) of the visas of 64 organised crime figures, predominantly OMCG members, impacting the Australian community through their involvement in serious and organised crime.

Leveraging Australia's visa compliance powers, many of those persons have already been removed from Australia while the remainder are on a removal pathway.

And finally, our collaboration with industry for the improvement of facilitation of trade and travel is one of our most profound reform programs.

I've briefly mentioned advances in traveller facilitation when I spoke of our airport reforms and certainly our collaboration with the aviation industry is vital to that reform, however one of the most fundamental reforms ever undertaken in trade facilitation in Australia is the trusted trader program.

Sometimes referred to as an Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) program, it is a trust-based system which allows accredited, reputable traders to benefit from low-touch, seamless, and economically advantageous preferences in the facilitation of imports and exports across Australia's border.

The Australian Trusted Trader (ATT) program was launched in July last year with a pilot project of four industry participants and has now grown to 22 participants. Through this pilot, we are at the cusp of accrediting Australia's first ever trusted trader which will shortly enjoy the benefits of this evolution in Australia's border trade clearance.

The ATT is projected to grow to approximately 1000 accredited traders representing 30 per cent of Australia's two-way trade volume by 2020.

Conclusion

I conclude by thanking the committee for allowing me to place on record this short statement highlighting the progress of the ABF in its first seven months of operation.