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Australian Government

TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY



Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing on Torres Strait: Cross Border Health Issues

PURPOSE

To outline the key concerns, issues and potential impacts of cross border health issues on the health and well-being of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people of the Torres Strait region.

KEY POINTS

- Cross-border health is a major issue in the northern Torres Strait Islands area, particularly on those islands that lie close to the coast of the South Fly District of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Western Province (e.g. Saibai, Dauan and Boigu Islands). This situation is primarily due to poor health services available to PNG villagers in PNG, and forces PNG patients to seek treatment at primary health centres in the northern Torres Strait area.
- The fact that the *Torres Strait Treaty* provides for free movement of traditional inhabitants for cultural activities in or near the zone, means that control of the flow of people in the Western province seeking both primary health care and treatment for serious diseases, even more difficult.

Statistical Information:

In 2007/2008 there were 52,674 traditional movements. Of this 28,596 (54%) PNG nationals visited Saibai Island. This is an increase of 5% compared to 2006/2007.

In 2008/2009 there were 29,626 traditional movements within the Torres Strait. Of this 17,388 (59%) PNG nationals visited Saibai Island. This was a decrease of 44% compared to 2007/2008

Table1: 2008-2009 Traditional Movements

Island	PNG Visitors
Saibai	17,388
Boigu	8,554
Dauan	1,279
Erub (Darnley)	742
Iama (Yam)	566
Ugar (Stephen)	498
Masig (Yorke)	172
Mer (Murray)	137
Badu	95
Mabuiag	63
Warraber (Sue)	53
Poruma (Coconut)	34
Kubin (Moa)	23
St Pauls (Moa)	22
Total	29,626

Health Issues Committee

- In 2003, the Joint Advisory Council of the Torres Strait Treaty established the Health Issues Committee (HIC). The TSRA is an active member of this committee through its involvement in the Treaty meetings and the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Health Partnership.
- In 2008, the HIC was tasked with developing a “package of measures” to address cross-border health concerns. These measures have since been developed and include the following PNG-specific strategies:
 - Establishing a system of outreach programs for the Western Province villages concerned (called “Treaty Villages”)
 - Assessment and improvement to laboratories in the Western Province centres of Daru, Mabuduan and Moorehead
 - Upgrade of the Western Province Aid Post at Buzi
 - Upgrade of the Mabuduan and Kunini Health Centres
 - Improvement and the implementation of key public health programs in the South Fly District (e.g. TB, Malaria, HIV/AIDS)
 - Improvements to the Daru Hospital, Laboratory and clinical management
 - Assist PNG with the implementation of *International Health Regulations (IHR)*
 - Improvements to Water Infrastructure in the South Fly/Western Province; and,
 - Development of a Human Resources Development Plan for the Western Province

- The second measure is directed towards improving surveillance and communication linkages between the Torres Strait and the PNG, and includes:
 - Funding and recruitment of a Western Province Communications Officer position
 - Ongoing funding for the Torres Strait Communication Officer
 - Establishment of reliable communication links between the South Fly and the Torres Strait
 - Development of a Communication Strategy for providing information for health care stakeholders, including health care professionals, agencies and communities; and,
 - Facilitated cross border movement for health workers and officials, so as to allow more effective and efficient administration of health care in the border area.

- The third measure relates to the Torres Strait Treaty Area Strategy and includes:
 - Re-development of the Saibai Clinic to enable it to cope with the increased workload of border crossers, and at the same time not compromise treatment of local residents.
 - Enhance HIV/AIDS and STI services to address the additional burden and risk from movement of PNG nationals under the Treaty; and,
 - More effective mosquito control in the Torres Strait to combat the spread of dengue fever (associated with the *Aedes albopictus* or Tiger mosquito).

- As part of the package of measures, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is also in the process of developing, in consultation with relevant agencies, a draft proposal for 'facilitated cross-border movement' through non-proclaimed ports in the Torres Strait, namely Saibai and Boigu. The main objective of this proposal is to streamline administrative arrangements for cross-border movement by specified health officials and professionals, as well as for nominated officials from other agencies eg border enforcement agencies. It is hoped that by facilitating the delivery of medical services in PNG/Western Province, the demand from PNG nationals for access to medical professionals and other officials crossing the border under this arrangement will still be required to have valid passports and visas, and otherwise comply with all customs and quarantine requirements.

- The Torres Strait community's Infrastructure, water supply and services are also heavily impacted on by regular traditional visits from the Western Province villages. Through the HIC, the PNG Government has agreed to lead on the feasibility of including water and sanitation infrastructure for the treaty villages in the package of measures. Inadequate safe water supplies in the treaty villages for long periods during the dry seasons has significant health impacts, and drives an increase in people movements across the Torres Strait which further contributes to tensions between traditional inhabitants in the Torres

Strait. Subject to the outcomes of the feasibility study, the Australian Government may chose to partner with the Government of PNG, the Western Province Government and the Torres Strait Regional Authority, to improve water access and sanitation facilities in the South Fly District of Western Province. This would form part of the Australian contribution to the package of measures to address cross border health issues in the Torres Strait.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

Support the development and delivery of initiatives that improve the Western Province's capacity to provide a good level of health service to its people.

Recommendation 2:

Improve water and environmental health infrastructure in PNG areas adjacent to the Torres Strait.

Recommendation 3:

Targeted delivery of funds to projects that are realistic and achievable and regular reporting of these to both Governments and to Traditional Inhabitants.

Recommendation 4:

Increase financial, community and infrastructure support to Torres Strait communities carrying the humanitarian burden from providing health services to PNG nationals. Refer to Attachment A

Recommendation 5:

Proactive measures by the Australian and Queensland Government to protect the Torres Strait population from public health threats that may result from Queensland Health treatment of PNG infectious and contagious diseases in Torres Strait communities including Thursday Island.

This is absolutely critical and not negotiable as there is no screening of visitors anymore as in previous times. We propose that screening of PNG visitors and Australian visitors happens before PNG Nationals are cleared to visit communities on both sides of the border. Australian and Queensland Government must wear any responsibility, cost and compensation to Torres Strait communities if an outbreak occurs if no screening of visitors continue to take place.

Statistical Information:

The following table provides the number of tuberculosis cases recorded from 2006-2008 at the Saibai Island primary health centre.

Table2: Number of episode of care (EOC) for Tuberculosis - 2006 to 2008 to Sabai Island PHCC.

Number of EOC for TB			
	2006	2007	2008
Suspect	88	17	28
Confirmed	26	14	19

Recommendation 6:

Better coordination from Queensland Health to engaging and informing the island communities and councils of when referral patients need to return for further treatment and confirm whether these times are appropriate.

Communities and councils also need to be notified of any possible infectious and contagious diseases health risks in cases when referral patients return to an island for further treatment.

Recommendation 7:

That the Queensland and Australian Governments need to set targets to reduce the number of presentations in our region, now that agencies are monitoring the attendances at Saibai and in Torres Strait.

We need to see up to a ^{50%}~~40%~~ reduction in presentations over the next 4 years of PNG nationals. Torres Strait has its own health issues that it must address therefore cross border effort need to complement this, not further burden it.

Statistical Information:

In 2007/2008 there were 2,000 (3.79%) health related movements into the Torres Strait.

Table 3: PNG Nationals number of presentation to Saibai PHC

Year	Number of presentations
2006 & 2007	Average of 90 per month over two years
2008	Average of 36 per month

Refer to Attachment A for more details on PNG National presentations for 2006 and 2006.

Recommendation 8:

We need to see proactive measures to increase the number of health preventative methods undertaken by both the Australian and PNG governments to address contagious / infectious diseases on both sides of the border.

Recommendation 9:

With the uncertain future of the Ok Tedi Mine and information coming to hand that Daru and the Western Province area will have increased transport infrastructure capacity, building PNG's capacity is now more critical than ever. We do not want this increased mobility resulting in increased pressure on the Torres Strait.

BACKGROUND

In 2006 the Australian Government Minister for Health and Ageing, the Queensland Minister for Health, Chair of TSRA, Chair of Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) and the Chair of the Torres Strait and NPA District Health Council signed a new five year Health Framework Agreement. The agreement commits the parties to work together to achieve positive health outcomes for the Indigenous people of the Torres Strait. The TSRA, along with other partnership agencies, have a significant role to play in helping to improve the standards and access to health services for the people of the Torres Strait.

A number of initiatives are pursued under this partnership and one of the key areas where TSRA maintains a watching brief is traditional movements between Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). The potential spread of diseases through cross border movements continues to be a concern in the region. With high rates of HIV and Tuberculosis (TB) in PNG, frequent cross border travel presents a real risk of these diseases spreading to the Torres Strait and mainland Australia.

In 2008 the Australia-PNG Ministerial Forum tasked the Torres Strait Cross Border Health Issues Committee (HIC) to develop a Package of Measures to address cross-border health concerns for the 2009 Ministerial Forum. The focus was to be on measures that would strengthen health services in the Torres Strait and Western Province of PNG and reduce the incidence and transmission of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis.

The HIC has made significant progress to date in developing the Package and will continue to work collaboratively to finalise its development. Implementation of some elements has already commenced and will continue to be phased from 1 July 2009. It is expected that PNG Government priorities

for the first year will be around scoping and documentation for capital works activities and capacity building.

The Package includes three sets of components agreed by both the Australian and Papua New Guinean Governments. The PNG elements of the Package have been agreed in principle and the PNG Government has developed indicative costing to be confirmed and relevant funding secured through the 2010 Budget process.

The Australian Government recently announced \$13.8 million in funding in the 2009-10 Budget for the Torres Strait Health Protection Strategy, which forms part of the Package. The Strategy will be implemented from July 2009. The Australian Government has also been working to advance the facilitated cross-border movement initiative and the Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project.

Notwithstanding the ongoing development of the Package, a large number of related activities on both PNG and Australian side have been successfully undertaken, or progressing including:

- the Western Province Communications Officer based on Daru Island has commenced provision of clinical outreach visits to village aid posts and health centres along the South Fly Coast to provide support in the follow-up and treatment of PNG nationals diagnosed with TB in Torres Strait island clinics;
- work is progressing on the upgrade of the Buzi Aid Post (adjacent to Boigu Island) to a two-person facility, including the recent installation of a solar refrigerator to store vaccines; and
- activities associated with the Tuberculosis Clinical Management and Laboratory Capacity Building Project, including: a recent clinical workshop at Daru General Hospital; work to facilitate the early commencement of capital works to upgrade the Central Public Health Laboratory in Port Moresby; and a database of PNG nationals diagnosed with TB in Torres Strait island clinics has been provided to the Western Province Communications Officer.

The Australian Government has agreed to provide \$9.2 million over four years for extensions to clinic facilities and staff housing on Saibai Island to commence 1 July 2009 and to develop and implement a culturally appropriate sexual health education campaign. The clinic extension work has been in response to growing demands being placed on the capacity of the clinic by a combination of normal Saibai community requirements and PNG nationals visiting Saibai under Treaty visitor arrangements. Building work is scheduled to be completed within two years of commencement. On completion, this project will ensure that Saibai Island residents are able to access health care services when needed.

HIV/AIDS, STIs and TB are of particular concern in the Torres Strait and services to meet increased needs are especially important to prevent the spread of disease and the transmission of disease between PNG and

Australia. The Australian Government has approved funding to provide for additional sexual health clinical staff including the additional costs related to community awareness in the Torres Strait.

Repeated incursions of *Aedes albopictus* mosquito have been encountered in the Torres Strait in past years and there has been an ongoing campaign of detection, control and elimination jointly funded by Queensland Health and the Australian Government. The Australian Government has provided funds totalling \$2.9 million over four years to support the extension of the campaign to 2013. *Aedes albopictus* is a vector for dengue and a range of other mosquito-borne diseases.

It has been an ongoing concern for a number of Torres Strait communities that traditional visits from the Western province to the Torres Strait impacts on community infrastructure, water supply and services. These matters have also been raised at Health Issues Committee (HIC) meetings.

To alleviate the impacts on Torres Strait communities, assistance through the AusAID Reconciliation Action Plan 2007-2010 is being sought to explore partnerships with Australian and Papua New Guinea agencies to build capacity within the Western Province Treaty Villages to enable construction of water infrastructure in their communities. AusAID is keen to work with TSRA in exploring ways in which the Torres Strait Major Infrastructure Program (MIP) could assist AusAID and PNG in the delivery of water sanitation infrastructure (including capacity-building) in the affected PNG Treaty villages. The Water and Sanitation Initiative (WATSAN) would serve to substantially reduce the incidence of relevant diseases in affect PNG villages, along with corresponding reduction in the need for PNG treaty villagers to seek health and related services in the Torres Strait. An Identification Mission Draft Terms of Reference (ToR) was drawn up by AusAID in January 2009. The draft ToR tentatively identified the role of the TSRA (MIP) representative in the WATSAN initiative. TSRA is keen to see such infrastructure improvements in affected Western Province villages, and is currently holding talks with AusAID.

Approval:

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Name: Mr John T. Kris
Position: Chairperson
Agency: Torres Strait Regional Authority
Date: 2 September, 2009

ATTACHMENT A

Table 1: PNG National: reasons for presentations, Saibai Island PHCC 2006

Reasons for Presentations	Percentages
Other Problems	20%
Doctor/Specialist review	11%
TB medication	10%
TB investigation	10%
Post Treatment Review	9%

Table 2: PNG National: reasons for presentations, Saibai Island PHCC 2007

Reasons for Presentations	Percentages
Other problems	19%
Confirmed TB	16%
Investigation TB	11%
Aches and Pains	9%
Surgical Elective Cases	8%
Prescriptions	8%
Doctors/ Specialist Review	8%

Table 3. Indications for Evacuation, Saibai Island PHCC 2006.

Reasons for Evacuations	Percentages
Other Problems	39%
TB investigation	18%
Specialist Review	12%
Wounds/lacerations	10%
Fractures	10%

Table 4: Indications for Evacuation, Saibai Island PHCC 2007:

Reason for Evacuations	Percentages
Surgical Elective Cases	31%
Other Problems	23%
Fractures	9%
TB investigation	7%
Eye problems/Blindness	3%

Table 5: Number of episode of care for Malaria - 2006 to 2008, Saibai Island PCC.

Number of EOC for Malaria Cases			
	2006	2007	2008
Suspect	26	17	29
Confirmed	20	14	6