



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Border Protection

Opening statement to Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Additional Estimates hearing
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Chair, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to deliver an opening statement on behalf of the department. I would like to briefly update you on significant developments since I last appeared before the Committee on 19 November 2013.

As you are aware, I have initiated a full independent investigation into the disturbances on Manus last week. News that one person died is a great tragedy and I extend my sympathies to family, friends and others affected by this sad event. There were also a number of other serious injuries sustained in the disturbance which is of great concern.

Mr Robert Cornall will lead the independent review into the disturbances on Manus. Terms of reference for the review will be released on the department's website later this week and the review is expected to be completed in the next few months.

While I know there is a thirst for information on the events of 16 to 18 February, it is important that the review be allowed to sort through the complex series of events.

I have implemented several measures to strengthen support and security on Manus and our staff on the ground and those directly involved in Canberra are working very hard with our contracted service providers, in consultation with the Papua New Guinea Government, to ensure the safety and security of everyone at the offshore processing centre - transferees, service providers and our own staff.

I would like to acknowledge the dedication and professionalism of everyone working on Manus during the difficult events of 16 to 18 February and our many onshore staff who provided support and advice to our people on Manus.

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In an unrelated but deeply regrettable incident last week, it also came to light that a regular report published by the Department inadvertently permitted access to some personal details of people in the immigration system. The material was removed as soon as the matter came to light and I have initiated an independent investigation into what happened, how it happened, and how we can ensure it does not happen again. An interim report on this incident is expected to be provided this week.

The Department is also working closely with the Privacy Commissioner who is conducting a separate investigation into this matter.

Chair, I would now like to say a few words about the broad range of services, programmes and activities the department undertakes.

In the light of current and expected continued fiscal constraint, the Department is working methodically to identify opportunities to achieve increased efficiency and value for money in its operations. We are undertaking a close examination of internal budget allocations against government policy and service delivery priorities to help inform future allocations. We are looking to how we can harness the innovative capability of our people to find better ways to do things. We are leveraging off the Government's commitment to deregulation to look for ways to simplify processes and requirements. Our staff numbers have fallen slightly as a result of APS-wide reductions in recruitment and as a result of the cessation of some ongoing and non-ongoing staff, all through natural attrition.

The department continues to seek efficiencies in program delivery through streamlining contract management arrangements for its network of Australian Visa Application Centres managed by third parties under competitively tendered agreements. It also continues to expand visa application sharing arrangements with Five Country Conference (FCC) partners. These outlets provide improved access and more flexible service options to our offshore clients.

We continue to deliver our business as usual activities across the border, the migration and humanitarian programs, citizenship and the myriad of other ongoing programmes the department runs.

Despite the focus on the arrival of illegal maritime arrivals we are delivering on the 190,000 Migration Programme, the 13,750 Humanitarian Programme, and in conjunction with other border agencies have facilitated the arrival and departure of 21.4million people through our airports and seaports. In the programme year to date my staff have finalised over 3.2million visa applications, both temporary and permanent. Our borders and compliance people are constantly on the lookout for those who attempt to enter or remain in the country illegally. This year, we celebrate the 65th year of citizenship and have conferred citizenship on over 17,800 of people on Australia Day this year.

We are also reviewing our detention network.

Detention facilities within the network are designed to be used flexibly to accommodate a range of detainee cohorts to respond to compliance and border protection activity. This principle assumes that when operational requirements change, so too will our use of facilities.

On 14 January 2014, the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection announced the closure of four sites across the immigration detention network.

These facilities are Scherger Immigration Detention Centre in Queensland; Leonora Alternative Place of Detention in Western Australia; Port Augusta Residential Housing in South Australia; and Pontville Alternative Place of Detention in Tasmania.

These facilities were never envisaged as being permanent and due to the rationalisation of the immigration detention network they are no longer required.

All four facilities no longer accommodate detainees and are effectively closed. Small teams of service provider and departmental staff are completing a range of tasks associated with formally decommissioning the facilities and returning them to their respective owners. This work will be finalised by the end of this month.

The closure of these facilities will bring significant financial savings for the government, which will begin to be realised from 1 March 2014.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to put on the record my sincere appreciation to all our staff for their dedication, ongoing hard work, commitment and outstanding efforts in a sensitive and challenging area of public policy.

Thank you.