

Response and Resp

The Commonwealth Government's National Illicit Drugs Strategy, announced in November 1997, allocated \$6.7 million over three years to upgrade surveillance and response capabilities in the Torres Strait. This will enhance the ability of Customs and other federal authorities to detect attempts to bring illicit drugs into Australia via the Torres Strait. LES JONES describes the challenge facing Customs in keeping the risks to the present low levels.

Several years ago, after an official visit to the Torres Strait, I was interviewed by a television journalist who asked me about our role in maintaining border controls in the area. My response was to describe it as a daunting task, given the unique nature of the environment in which we have to exercise this role.

Customs legislation works in our favour in most other areas of Australia. It enables us, for example, to establish seaports and airports and fix their limits. It ensures that the master of a vessel, or the pilot of an aircraft, will bring their vessel or aircraft into one of those places. It also requires that the master or pilot declare to us what they are carrying – and even give this information to us in advance.

Most of our business is now dealt with electronically. Because we receive manifests, airway bills and passenger details electronically in advance of arrival, we are well placed to match that data with our intelligence or information holdings and to identify in advance the extent of any threat or risk to the border.

In the Torres Strait we have no such safeguards. But we have the closest thing that Australia has to a land border with another country. The only difference is that instead of motor vehicles being used for transport, we have enormous numbers of small craft plying throughout the Torres Strait and crossing our border every day.

The Torres Strait Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea allows traditional inhabitants living in areas identified in the treaty to cross the border without passport, Customs or visa clearance. While creating enormous social benefits for those who live in the region, it also creates a unique challenge to border integrity.

Customs adopts a risk management approach, deploying its resources in areas most likely to achieve a worthwhile outcome in the interests of the government and the community. The Torres Strait is no exception.

We participated with other agencies, in Australia and Papua New Guinea, in the preparation of a Joint Strategic Assessment of potential threat in the Torres Strait region. Coordination and cooperation arrangements there are probably stronger than anywhere else in Australia.

Criminal activities, organised through established networks, are taking place in this area. The overall assessment is that the risks are being contained, although there is always potential for escalation. Our experience and intelligence also suggest that Customs-related criminal activities principally involve low-volume cannabis trafficking and some trade in firearms. However, there is no evidence of the movement of hard drugs or commercial shipments of weapons through the region. But we acknowledge that the

Responsibility

IN THE TORRES STRAIT



The Wauri, alongside a foreign vessel which ran aground in Torres Strait, north of Thursday Island, on 13 June 1997, with 139 suspected illegal immigrants on board.

potential exists for current trafficking to increase and possibly diversify into other commodities, including harder drugs.

As trade increases between Papua New Guinea and countries traditionally regarded as high-risk drug sources, so does the opportunity for criminal elements to take advantage of any weaknesses in border integrity. Our activities are increasing and diversifying so that we will be best placed to combat any threat.

We have, as a starting point, the Joint Strategic Assessment of cross-border criminality, linked with a range of management and operational practices to enhance our intelligence base. We also have our established networks for information and intelligence exchange between appropriate Australian agencies. In addition there are now regular liaison visits with our

counterparts in Papua New Guinea. This will increase the knowledge base on which we undertake strategic activity and assist us in responding to tactical situations as they arise.

While the focus of these liaisons were initially drug or gun-related, it is important to recognise that Customs role extends to assisting in matters relating to immigration, fisheries, quarantine, wildlife conservation, money laundering and other issues of government concern at the border.

Customs adopts a two-pronged approach in maintaining border integrity through surveillance by Coastwatch and through the Customs Watch community participation program.

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Coastwatch

From an aerial surveillance perspective, the Torres Strait region is the most intensively patrolled maritime area in Australia. Much of this is carried out by Coastwatch, a branch of Customs, which coordinates and manages Australia's civil coastal and offshore surveillance and response service. It uses civil aviation contractors, Australian Defence Force patrol boats and aircraft and ocean-going vessels of the Customs Marine Fleet.

Coastwatch services other government agencies such as the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Australian Federal Police. Coastwatch activities are determined by the surveillance and response needs of these client agencies.

The major surveillance focus is sighting and reporting vessels approaching the Australian coast or operating within the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone (AEEZ) and the Australian Fishing Zone (AFZ).

Emphasis is on the identification of suspect illegal entrant vessels (SIEVs), illegal foreign fishing vessels (FFVs), vessels possibly involved in illicit drug importations, unauthorised landings on the coast or on adjacent islands, reefs and coral cays, and watching for pollution of the environment.

Coastwatch covers the Australian coastline, Australia's offshore territories, the AFZ and the AEEZ. To appreciate the size of the task, this amounts to about 37 000 kilometres of coastline and an offshore maritime area which is larger than the Australian mainland.

Coastwatch has offices in Broome, Darwin and Cairns and a liaison and planning officer on Thursday Island. A central operations centre in Canberra maintains an overview of all surveillance operations and provides clients and members of the public with a 24-hour point of contact.

For operations in the Torres Strait area, Coastwatch has two Islander aircraft based on Horn Island and a helicopter based on Thursday Island. The Islanders fly about 3300 hours per year and the helicopter operates for about 480 hours per year. They flew over 900 sorties in 1996-97.

This surveillance effort is supplemented by aircraft equipped with surface radar and other sophisticated electronic sensors on a needs basis. Aircraft with these capabilities are deployed from Cairns, and occasionally from Darwin.

In 1996-97, about \$3.5 million was spent on flying operations in the Torres Strait region. It is planned in 1997-98 to fly the Islander aircraft for about 3300 hours and the helicopter for about 750 hours. The latter figure is a 50-per cent increase over the previous year and will be increased to 1000 hours per year from 1998-99 on. Again, this will be supplemented by radar-

equipped aircraft from Cairns or Darwin. These figures do not include calls for specific tactical operations as these are unpredictable.

Coastwatch works closely with Customs vessels in the area which respond to potential or actual breaches of Australian law.

Fremantle Class patrol boats provided by the Australian Defence Force are also available to Coastwatch for surface response purposes. These are used in response to sightings of potentially illegal activities. Overall, Defence provides 1800 patrol boat days to the national civil surveillance program. Most activity is concentrated off northern Australia and the vast majority of days are consumed in the interception and apprehension of foreign fishing vessels that have been sighted by Coastwatch aircraft.

In 1996-97, in the Torres Strait region, there were 175 incidents detected by Coastwatch, which resulted in an active response. These were some of the 20 500 sightings reported by Coastwatch aircraft in the area, including 2734 sightings of foreign fishing vessels.

Coastwatch, like any other operator of aircraft in Australia, provides support to the search and rescue authorities. In 1996-97, Coastwatch responded to 10 SAR incidents in the Torres Strait region.

The Customs fleet includes the *Wauri*, a 25-metre twin-hulled vessel based at Thursday Island. It has two crews, providing a potential of around 300 operational sea days per year and is dedicated to operations in and around the Torres Strait. Other Customs vessels can be deployed from other regions to meet any increased threat.

The *Wauri* is contracted to undertake 110 dedicated sea days of strategic fisheries patrols per year, but also undertakes response in immigration, quarantine and other border enforcement matters. It is also used to transport Australian officials to Daru for regular liaison visits with PNG authorities and a more recent initiative has seen it used for the conduct of joint border patrols on the PNG side of the border, with PNG officials on board exercising jurisdiction.

The vessel is an important demonstration of our physical presence. It also takes officers to islands to engage in our valuable community awareness programs. These comprise the second prong of our approach in protecting the border.

Community involvement

Customs has several community-based awareness programs. Frontline involves businesses such as importers and exporters. It encourages them to tell us about anything they regard as suspicious or warranting further investigation.

Customs Watch is directed to groups such as aero clubs, fishing clubs, other groups or people who may observe activities that they believe might be of concern to Customs.

Flowing from this, a specific education and awareness campaign was developed by Customs staff for the inhabitants of islands in the strait. This program recognises that local residents are best placed to observe and determine any unusual activity in their region which maybe of concern to Customs. By educating local residents about the issues we are interested in, and by providing contact points where information can be reported, we are encouraging them to assist in protecting their own community from unlawful activities.

These initiatives have been welcomed by the various community groups and provide an important contribution to our efforts. We do not ask community members to become involved in the enforcement of border laws or to expose themselves to any risk.

Customs has had a presence in the Torres Strait since Federation, although Queensland first established a customs presence there in 1877. Our office on Thursday Island is staffed by seven full-time Customs officers, including one Torres Strait islander. These numbers can be boosted at any time to meet operational needs.

A major function of the office is maintaining border integrity and officers regularly visit the different communities to raise awareness and to encourage community support. Staff is also engaged in clearing international aircraft and passengers at Horn Island and international vessels arriving in local ports.

During a recent visit to the Torres Strait, the Prime Minister, John Howard, undertook to review the Government's efforts in regional border enforcement. The outcomes of the review were reflected in his announcement of the National Illicit Drugs Strategy in November 1997. This strategy incorporates initiatives specifically aimed at improving surveillance and detection in the Torres Strait (see Customs and the National Illicit Drugs Strategy, this page).

In addition to strengthening our border management capability, Customs recognises the necessity to help our colleagues in PNG improve their capabilities. Work is under way to help improve communications into the Western Provinces of PNG. We have also agreed to help PNG Customs assess training needs in border-related issues, and then in the development and delivery of the training.

It is in our mutual interest that on both sides of the Australia-PNG border we have the capacity to deter those who seek to breach our respective border controls.

We look forward to continuing our cooperative and fruitful partnership that exists across that invisible line.

Les Jones is National Director, Border Management, Australian Customs Service.

This article is an edited version of a speech which he delivered to a seminar on Torres Strait – Policing the Open Border which was organised by the Australian Defence Studies Centre. The seminar was conducted at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, in February 1998.

Customs and the National Illicit Drugs Strategy

The Prime Minister's National Illicit Drug Strategy includes the provision of \$6.7 million over the next three years to enable Customs to upgrade surveillance and response capabilities in the Torres Strait.

These measure include:

- Provision of several small, ready-response boats to be located on the outer islands.
- Provision of an additional 500 helicopter flying hours under existing Coastwatch contract arrangements.
- Positioning of additional lit helicopter landing facilities on a number of islands.
- Conduct of a two-month night aerial surveillance trial, using radar and night vision equipped aircraft. The trial will coincide with the introduction of the new response vessels.
- Joint border patrols targeting cross-border criminal activity with Papua New Guinea's Customs service using both Australian Customs and PNG vessels.
- An additional four Torres Strait islanders to be recruited and trained as crew for the Customs patrol vessel *Wauri*.
- A number of Torres Strait islanders who are police aides, Quarantine cooperators or Immigration Movement Monitors, will be further trained as Customs observers.

The Australian Federal Police were also provided with funding to establish a permanent presence on Thursday Island and, to support these measures, Customs is establishing a secure law enforcement communications network in the Torres Strait.

On 16 March 1998 the Prime Minister announced the second round of funding under the Government's Tough On Drugs Strategy. This included an additional \$4.4 million to be spent over four years to extend Customs intelligence analysis capacity.

From the Cape to PNG

JASON DICK describes the work of a Thursday Island Customs officer.



Jason Dick on the Wauri at Thursday Island.

To many people the work of the Australian Customs Service often appears to be a somewhat mundane, if necessary, shuffling of forms and faxes, applications and permissions. It is easy to forget that this is by no means the sum total of Customs activities. In fact, little could be further from the truth.

The Customs District Office of Thursday Island, with its seven officers, is responsible for the geopolitical jigsaw puzzle that comprises the Torres Strait. It is an old port, established more than 100 years ago, with a somewhat turbulent history. It was a keystone to Australian colonial activities in western Papua New Guinea and an important communications, fuel and supply centre for the allied forces in the Pacific Ocean campaign during World War II. There still exist old fortifications that date back to British Empire fears about the colonial aspirations of the Russians in the 19th century. The Strait is a major route for commercial shipping and smaller private vessels moving from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.

At the port, and the international airport on neighbouring Horn Island, Customs processed 436 clearances in 1996 and just under 400 in 1997. So far 1998 promises to be a bumper year for the boarding officers, in large part due to Australian Army famine relief flights to Papua New Guinea. Coastwatch operates three resident aircraft and planes visit from Darwin and Cairns on daily flights throughout the year. Under the Torres Strait Treaty, an average of 20 000 people travel

to and from the Strait and PNG every year for traditional purposes, without the immigration controls standard elsewhere. It is, in short, a very busy place.

The first thing I noticed when I started at Thursday Island (TI in local parlance) was that a typical day was generally anything but typical. A boarding job is not just a matter of knowing the forms and walking up a gangway - you also have to learn how to drive, launch, recover and maintain a speedboat. When a phone call is received regarding illicit or suspect activity, officers will usually attend the scene by helicopter or patrol boat, two more modes of transport that require special skills, just to ride around in. (Anyone who has been strapped into a cage, blindfolded, dropped into a swimming pool and turned upside-down to simulate a helicopter crash into the sea will agree that the main skill is not to panic).

Tropical disease is another fascinating subject for the newcomer; squeamishness about needles is not an option. Neither is a tendency to air-sickness or a fear of flying; one has to be able to convert that thick adrenal rush that accompanies flying at 200 kilometres an hour in a helicopter at tree-top level into a cool detachment or, at least, yahooping bravado. One officer has been chased across a flooded mud flat by sharks.

The political landscape in the strait is no less fraught with peril. Recent media interest has put the spotlight on government activities here. Officers must be attuned to all manner of political concerns. These range from indigenous aspirations to self-determination and the sensitivities of the Wik and Mabo cases to issues of wider community interest, including the use of the strait by illegal migrants, drug traffickers and gun runners. Increases to resources in the Torres Strait by the Prime Minister under the National Illicit Drugs Strategy place an even greater burden of responsibility on Customs TI office to perform in a complex environment.

For the staff here, however, this challenge is no greater than those they have faced in the past and will no doubt face in the future. The Torres Strait is once again a focal point for the nation's attention to protection of its own interests. This time it is not Japanese Zeros or Russian warships that have upped the ante, but the sound of outboard motors over the crash of the surf at night, driving small craft that might be carrying drugs, firearms or illegal entrants.

Jason Dick is Customs Operations Officer on Thursday Island. He has been there for two years and has served as Office Manager and Senior Boarding Officer.