

Border Security in our region

Customs, with the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) undertook a project to examine border security in the Sulu/Celebes Sea region of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. This area came to prominence after the Bali bombings when it was identified that the region was a transit route for travel to terrorist training camps in the southern Philippines. Jess Hemmings, an analyst with Customs in Sydney, and a consultant retained by Customs due to his knowledge of the area, were given the task of spending six weeks to obtain as much information as they could on border controls in the region. Jess reports on his experience:

After a whirlwind series of meetings in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila, the consultant and myself met up with the representatives from DFAT and from DIMIA who would be accompanying us during our time in the southern Philippines. Both would prove to be excellent travelling companions. From Manila, the four of us flew to Southern Mindanao to start the field component of our research. We viewed ports in Davao, General Santos and Cotabato meeting with Customs, Immigration, Police and port authorities among others. This leg of the trip was pretty uneventful except for our first morning in General Santos when, as we left our hotel, we noticed several heavily armed soldiers, wearing military camouflage fatigues and riding motorbikes. As we left our hotel, each of the bikes took up position behind us. Very concerning. However, it turned out that the local military commander had taken it upon himself to provide us with protection and had just not informed anyone. Thankfully, the next day they were dressed a little more discreetly.

From General Santos, we travelled by military convoy to Cotabato before flying to Zamboanga which would mark our last stop in the Philippines. From here the consultant and I would travel to Malaysia for the next leg of our trip. We managed to hunt down the ticket office for Phoenix Airways - a new airline that had been operating for only four weeks between the Philippines and Malaysia. Needless to say, we boarded our flight with some trepidation. My nervousness wasn't allayed any when the company rep checking tickets at the base of the stairs said "good luck". Good Luck! What did he know that I didn't? But the flight turned out to be quite pleasant, flight stewardesses dressed like thunderbirds, a

clear sky free of turbulence with a bright blue ocean studded with coral atolls passing beneath the wings.

Though we worked hard, I will most remember Malaysia for the magnificent hospitality shown to us by Kastams. People were recalled from leave (it was Chinese New Year), vehicles were provided and almost every night we were provided with a lavish seafood meal. All too soon it was time to go to Indonesia. But it wasn't to prove as easy as we hoped. Due to a last minute change in plans we no longer had a valid Indonesian visa and time was running out. It was Friday and we had to leave by Monday if we were to make our meetings in Indonesia.

So, between meetings, we went to the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau to try and get a visa only to find that it was closed - apparently it was a public holiday in Indonesia. So on Monday we went back and tried again. Only problem - so did all of the Indonesian workers in the Tawau area. Our Malaysian hosts again came to the rescue and, calling in a favour, got us the only visas to be issued that day.

All done, we headed straight for the port and caught the local ferry to Nunukan in Indonesia passing through to Tarakan before flying to Manado in Sulawesi. In Manado, we met up with the DFAT and AFP representatives. Both would prove to be invaluable for the last part of the project. The DFAT representative was able to speak Bahasa Indonesia (particularly valuable as nobody in this part of Indonesia spoke English), and the AFP representative had an extensive network



Navy and Customs vessel- Tarakan, Indonesia

of contacts within PoRI (the Indonesian national Police force), who were to be our hosts and chaperones.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to see much more of Manado than the view from the taxi or the hotel window. After five weeks of non-stop travelling (and some dodgy food) my body decided it had had enough. I spent the next 36 hours feeling very sorry for myself and trying to regain the strength for the last leg of our mission - the Indonesian/Philippines border.

From Manado, our party boarded the overnight ferry to Tahuna on Sangir Island. What an experience. Above decks people lay everywhere, on mattresses, on benches, in-groups or wherever they could catch some breeze. Below decks was like something out of the apocalypse. People were crammed into bunks, groups of devoutly religious were holding prayer meetings and singing hymns, others were eating or playing cards while the rest were desperately trying to sleep.

At 4am, we gratefully pulled into Tahuna. At the last moment, we were advised "there may be a small official welcoming party so we had better dress appropriately". Half way through changing, standing there in my t-shirt and boxer shorts, I suddenly realised that I was a little too late. Looking around, I was greeted by the sight of about 10 PoRI officers standing in the door of my cabin all staring at their half-naked representative from the Australian Government.

Our 'small' welcoming party ended up being what appeared to be half of the local police force. Waiting for us on the wharf were our two vehicles, along with a police jeep, three police motorcycle outriders and two chase vehicles all with fully uniformed police officers and flashing lights. After two hours of sleep, it was all a little overwhelming.

Our main reason for going to Tahuna was not to visit the island, as beautiful as it was with its coconut palms, stunningly blue waters and sandy beaches, but to use it as a staging point for getting to Marore Island. Marore, approximately 180 kilometres north of Sangir Island is the border post with the Philippines and 'an agreed traditional border crossing'. The region is also a major traditional trading route between Mindanao and Suluwesi.

However, luck was not going to all go our way. The region was experiencing unseasonably good weather and, as a result, we arrived in Tahuna to find that all of the local trading boats (the same vessels that the local PoRI were trying to hire for us) had all taken off to the Philippines to make the most of the opportunity. Eventually the local PoRI managed to find us a vessel in the form of the local Department of Education boat.

After consulting with PoRI, we were told that it would take about eight hours to get to Marore and back. So, dressed in



River ferry - Cotabato, Philippines

business attire, we set off. PoRI's estimate of eight hours would prove to be wildly optimistic. It would be three days before we returned, unwashed, salt encrusted and very, very tired. But what a trip. Two days crashing headlong into waves, dropping in on a local island community (that happily took us in for the night putting us up in their homes), swimming in crystal clear coral filled waters, spotting flying fish and small local fishing vessels dotting the horizon.

We finally reached Marore to find that the local Customs officer, who we had travelled all this way to meet was back in Manado where we had just come from and the Imigrasi officer was on leave. We did, however, get to meet a number of agencies and the poor Imigrasi caretaker (who was beside himself as nobody had told him that a senior officer from Jakarta head office was coming to visit) took really good care of us. The Customs office was cleaned, beds were requisitioned from nearby houses, bottles of soft drink and food miraculously appeared. We slept very well that night.

After six long weeks we returned to Australia. While the trip was very demanding and physically draining, it was the trip of the lifetime and the highpoint of my Customs career. I got to see some remote and spectacular parts of south-east Asia, I got to meet some amazing people and learned a lot about the current security situation on our doorstep, and the agencies involved in border security. Through the course of the project we managed to collect some valuable information that will be used by Customs and a variety of other agencies to provide capacity assistance to the region.

Postscript: During our time in Malaysia, we learnt that bombs had exploded in three of the five cities we visited in the Philippines. All bombs exploded in the vicinities of where we were staying. Also, shortly after our return the general manager of the Polloc Port in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Philippines, was assassinated. These incidents highlight that the situation in the region is still very dangerous.