



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Refugees: Boat Sinkings
QUESTION

3241

Tuesday, 6 February 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

QUESTION

Date Tuesday, 6 February 2001
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Questioner Brown, Sen Bob
Speaker

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder Vanstone, Sen Amanda
Question No. 3241

Refugees: Boat Sinkings

Senator Brown (Tasmania) asked the Minister representing the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, upon notice, on 21 December 2000:

With reference to the alleged loss of life following two refugee boats returning into Cyclone Sam between Indonesia and Australia:

- (1) When were the Australian authorities, in any way, first informed of the tragedy and who was informed.
- (2) When was the Minister first informed.
- (3) What is now known of the tragedy.
- (4) What has been the Minister's response and when
- (5) What is the calender of events for the Australian Government's response
- (6) Were four survivors picked up by a Japanese vessel: if so (a) who were they; (b) where are they now; and (c) what have they revealed.
- (7) Can details be provided of the cost of Australia's at-sea or in-the-air response.

Senator Vanstone (South Australia—Minister for Justice and Customs)—The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has provided the following answers to the honourable senator's question:

(1) Reports of possible boat sinkings were first received from community sources in Indonesia by officers of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta overnight on 11 December. These reports were first received by DIMA and AFP in Canberra on Tuesday 12 December.

(2) The Minister was first informed of these reports on 12 December 2000.

(3) It has now been ascertained from interviews concluded this week with recent boat arrivals that all missing and overdue vessels have now arrived safely. Two vessels feared sunk in a cyclone had run into severe difficulties at sea and had to return to port for repairs. The passengers subsequently sailed successfully to Australia. A third vessel had crashed into a reef off a remote Indonesian island. All passengers were subsequently rescued. A fourth vessel ran aground on remote Lagrange Island in the Admiralty Gulf, where it remained unaccounted for for over a week. The passengers from this vessel reported that three persons were washed out to sea: they have not been located despite an air and sea search of the area.

(4) Upon receiving reports from Indonesia the Minister tasked the Australian Embassy in Jakarta and Tokyo to check with local authorities and with community contacts to be able to confirm any sinkings. The Australian, Japanese and Indonesian maritime safety authorities were requested to track down any reports of the rescue of the 4 immigrants by a Japanese tanker. All reports from the Australian community of missing persons were followed through, with names then checked off against the nominal rolls of incoming boats, until all names were accounted for. Daily flights of the Australian territorial zone and the Ashmore Reef area were conducted by Coastwatch aircraft. Coastal Surveillance did not detect any illegal immigration vessel movements in the area until December 16.

(5) December 12 - three reports received from Indonesia of two boats missing presumed sunk

December 12 - Minister's press release, providing information on the reported sinking of one boat and that another was missing

December 13 - more reports of missing vessels received from people smugglers in Indonesia and from community sources in Australia

December 15 - more reports of boats missing en route to Australia

December 16 - arrival of the first two December boats at Ashmore and Torres Strait

December 17 - arrival of a third boat, Ashmore Reef area

December 18 - arrival of two more vessels, Ashmore Reef

December 21 - discovery of a vessel at Lagrange Island which had been missing for over a week, two more arrivals at Ashmore Reef

December 27 - arrival of another vessel at Ashmore Reef

January 2 - interviews with recent arrivals concluded, with known passengers from missing boats finally accounted for

(6) The original reports from Indonesia that 4 survivors had been picked up by a Japanese tanker have not been able to be verified.

(7) The search for the vessels was conducted through routine daily Coastwatch flights of the Ashmore Reef area as the reports of sinkings were insufficiently detailed to allow for the dedicated tasking of any search effort to be conducted. The additional specific cost for air and sea searches was therefore nil.