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**OPERATION SOVEREIGN BORDERS:
INITIAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK**
LTGEN Angus Campbell, DSC, AM
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Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be with you this evening.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today and their continuing contribution to our national story.

I very much appreciate the invitation by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute to speak with you tonight, coming as it does two months after the end of the monsoon, a point at which I think some view of our progress can be made.

In offering my initial reflections and future outlook, I am keen to provide you with as much insight as I can into the complexity behind this current border security operation of significant public interest.

As you know, Operation Sovereign Borders is a military-led, whole-of-government effort, to counter maritime people smuggling.

I work with a very talented and dedicated team across the breadth of the Australian government, whose quiet, determined efforts are the wellspring of any success we may achieve. To them, I continue to be extremely grateful.

Before we get into Operation Sovereign Borders, I think it worth reflecting more widely on the factors underpinning such a unique, complex and challenging operation. Tonight I would like to quickly overview some of the key dynamics in global migration and humanitarian assistance before looking to our Joint Agency Task Force and the OSB response.

Please bear with me as I initially work through some important numbers, each speaking to the circumstances of people in this world we share.

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Global migration

So, let's start by looking at global migration trends. The International Monetary Fund identifies four key aspects to globalisation and the benefits it provides the international community. These are:

- world trade and transactions;
- capital and investment flows;
- the dissemination of knowledge; and, importantly for this discussion,
- the international movement of people.¹

The estimated number of people moving across national borders has increased dramatically over the past fifty years, from around 77 million in 1960 to around 232 million in 2013; or just over 3% of the world's population.² Both the number and proportion of international movements continues to rise, as does the world's population, which is estimated to increase to around 8.1 billion people by 2025.³

To provide some idea of the scale of movement, last financial year Australia experienced more than 30 million cross-border movements by students, tourists and temporary migrants, as well as permanent residents and Australian citizens.⁴ It is estimated that by 2020 there will be 50 million movements per year across Australia's borders.⁵

Migration to Australia

It is also worth remembering that, from the ancient dreamtime, through colonial settlement, to post-War programs over more recent decades, we are all in some way migrants to this great land, and together have contributed to the rich, vibrant story of Australia.

¹ IMF (2000).

² UNDESA (2013).

³ UNDESA (2014).

⁴ DIBP (2013b).

⁵ DIBP (2012), p. 14.

Today, migrants come to Australia from over 180 countries. The current top five source countries for migrants—excluding New Zealand citizens who are able to travel more freely—are India, China, the United Kingdom, the Philippines and South Africa.⁶

Nearly one in four living Australians were born overseas.⁷ By comparison, in that great melting pot, the United States, around one in eight Americans were born overseas.⁸

Australia's managed migration programs fill skill shortages, help re-unite families and provide refuge to those in need of protection, and have done so, in a considered manner, for decades.

Migration helps fuel our economic prosperity, our rich cultural diversity, our security and our capacity to innovate in an increasingly competitive and complex world.

It seems reasonable to conclude that migration will continue to be a very significant part of Australia's future.

Humanitarian assistance

Humanitarian assistance to people in need is an important element of the larger story of human movement. Since 1960, when UNHCR estimates the global refugee population was 1.6 million people, numbers rose steadily to a high point of 17.8 million people in 1992, before declining again. Since 1996, the global refugee population has hovered between 10 and 12 million people. But it is important to note that these figures relate to refugees only and do not include internally displaced persons.⁹

⁶ DIBP (2013a).

⁷ ABS (2012).

⁸ US Census Bureau (2012).

⁹ UNHCR (2014d).

When looking more broadly to include internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and other vulnerable people, UNHCR data indicates that there has been a substantial trend increase in the number of displaced persons since the recent global low in 2003 of 14.8 million people to a staggering 35.8 million people in 2012.¹⁰

These numbers are well beyond the capacity of any one country or group of countries to support; a sustained and multifaceted international effort is essential.

Australia has long been committed to this broader effort: we have a proud history as a compassionate refugee resettlement country, with a resettlement program long considered one of the best in the world.

This can sometimes be lost in the public debate.

But the facts are impressive: since 1945, Australia has accepted more than 800,000 refugees into our community.¹¹

Australia, along with the United States and Canada, consistently ranks as one of the top three countries in the world for the resettlement of UNHCR-referred refugees. Between our three countries, we contribute around 80 per cent of global resettlement places each year.

In per capita terms, Australia also compares favourably. In 2012 for example, one person was granted protection in the European Union for every 4,800 Europeans¹², while in Australia¹³, one person was granted protection for every 1,700 Australians.¹⁴ This is a much smaller socio-economic base from which each refugee is supported.

Of course, annual resettlement programs such as these pale in scale to the acute strain that large refugee flows place on countries neighbouring conflict, such as present day Lebanon, Turkey and Pakistan.

¹⁰ UNHCR (2014a). For the present purpose, 'displaced persons' comprise refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless persons and 'others' of concern. Other aggregate figures used by UNHCR may also include populations of returned refugees and returned IDPs.

¹¹ DIBP (2013b).

¹² Taking into account both formal resettlement programs and asylum seekers who arrive irregularly.

¹³ Based on persons accepted under the Australian Humanitarian Program.

¹⁴ Eurostat (2013); Eurostat (2014); ABS (2014).

UNHCR's resettlement program, in 2012 involving only 22 participating countries,¹⁵ generally contributes to resettling less than 1% of the world's refugees each year,¹⁶ with between 75 to 90% of refugees remaining in their region of origin.¹⁷

Migration Dynamics

Against this background, of a world on the move in unprecedented numbers, many inter-related factors have an impact on the pathways and behaviour of migrants, including those of asylum seekers and refugees.

Understanding the interplay of these factors, commonly characterised as 'push', 'pull' and 'enabling', has informed the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders.

- 'Push' factors include the difficult or uncertain political, security and economic conditions in origin countries;
- 'Pull' factors include asylum seeker policies in destination countries, and perceptions of destination countries' acceptance of refugees; and
- 'Enabling' factors, that facilitate people movement, include modern transportation and communication networks, as well as the significant and growing prevalence of 'unregulated' actors and criminals, such as people smugglers, opportunistically exploiting a global 'market'.

Some 'push' factors can be overwhelming, real and ever-present. Large-scale conflict, as we are seeing in Syria, is a case in point. Just a few years ago, Syria was one of the world's largest 'host' countries of refugees (mainly from Iraq), whereas now it is the world's largest source country of asylum seekers.¹⁸

Many 'enabling' factors, related to global mega-trends, are generally not susceptible to influence, and are often beyond the control of any single nation, institution or regulatory system.

¹⁵ UNHCR (2013), p. 3.

¹⁶ UNHCR (n.d.).

¹⁷ UNHCR (2012), p. 11.

¹⁸ UNHCR (2014b) and UNHCR (2014c)

Likewise, many of the 'pull' factors reflect enduring, large scale, historical circumstances.

There are, however, exceptions to these more general observations, and it is in these smaller but important spaces, that Operation Sovereign Borders has sought to work in bringing about change.

In this respect, it is important to acknowledge the comments of our neighbours; that 'pull' factors have, to some degree, influenced the views of potential illegal immigrants, as well as the opportunistic and exploitative behaviours of people smugglers.

People Smugglers

When people smugglers dominate a migration pathway some very negative consequences emerge. Drawing on work undertaken in the Department of Immigration and Border Protection¹⁹— I would emphasise five:

- Firstly, there is the loss of thousands of lives at sea over many years and in many locations, including off the coasts of the United States, Italy, Greece, Spain, Malta, Thailand, Indonesia and Australia.
- Secondly, there is the significant vulnerability, hardship and exploitation experienced by people at the hands of people smugglers.
- Thirdly, there is the opportunity cost to the most destitute of refugees, whose poverty makes them an unattractive business proposition to people smugglers. Such people typically miss out on resettlement when countries are focussed on assisting those who have been smuggled.
- Fourthly, there is the erosion of confidence in institutions due to the difficulties in managing the nexus between unregulated migration, managed migration and border security, as has been a particular issue in Europe; and

¹⁹ Koser and McAuliffe (2013).

- Finally, there is the challenge of maintaining and promoting bilateral and regional relationships strained from time to time by irregular migrant flows and by counter people smuggling operations, as has on occasion been the case in the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Southeast Asian regions in recent years.

If by now your head is spinning, welcome to my world. There are many actors, interests and challenges, sometimes cooperating, often conflicting. And these all need to be considered in seeking to counter maritime people smuggling, within a more complex human story played out in legal, diplomatic, security and humanitarian terms.

Joint Agency Task Force Approach

In September of last year, the newly elected government adopted a Joint Agency Task Force approach to dealing with people smugglers. In doing so it is important to note that Departments and Agencies within the portfolio responsibilities of the Ministers for Immigration, Defence, Foreign Affairs and the Attorney General all have significant responsibilities in countering people smuggling. And other agencies under other ministers have a contributing interest in the matter.

The great benefit of temporarily adopting a Joint Agency Task Force approach, under a Minister tasked to coordinate across government, is that it connects all aspects of Australia's response and sharply focuses attention on how to get to where we want to be.

It allows an accountable, integrated, systemic response to a systemic problem.

I work in close cooperation with Departmental and Agency heads and see my role as facilitating new models to counter people smuggling. Innovation is essential. Any initiative, within the bounds of law and safety, that might deter or disrupt the smuggler's trade, is carefully considered.

I would encourage more attention be focussed on the systemic nature of the Joint Agency Task Force approach, rather than from which institution its leader is appointed. What is being achieved is very much the product of a collaborative effort.

Operation Sovereign Borders

To stop maritime people smuggling to Australia, my team and I are trying to counter transnational criminal syndicates. The system they have put in place is complex, adaptive and insidious; undermining institutions, promoting corruption and exploiting desperate people.

To break that system we have applied a wide range of complementary measures.

No one measure is sufficient.

We work with partners in our region and with source countries to:

- deter, disrupt and prosecute smugglers;
- improve border control measures; and
- inform potential illegal immigrants of both Australian policies and the dangers they expose themselves to by doing business with people smugglers.

We look to make recommendations to government regarding policy settings on 'pull' or 'enabling' factors, to discourage the use of irregular pathways and emphasise the use of our managed migration program.

We also work with the Governments of Papua New Guinea and Nauru to assist their processing of transferees in the Manus and Nauru Offshore Processing Centres.

We have greatly appreciated the cooperation and complementary efforts of many countries.

And where it matters most, on the water, I have sought to carefully manage the release of information to protect our people and avoid assisting smugglers. (And, for those interested in the progressive release of information which is no longer operationally sensitive, I would direct you to the OSB website.)

To put it simply, we have been trying to squeeze the people smuggling system everywhere, and in every way, we can.

By late last year we saw the number of boats arriving in Australia reduce from a mid-year high of 48 in July to just 5 in each of October and November. In this effort I acknowledge in particular the work of Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea and Nauru, and of course the policy settings of both the current and former governments.

I was always very sceptical as to whether, without doing more, we would have gotten below an average of about one boat a week. Unfortunately, there are too many prospective travellers susceptible to believing that Nauru is a town in Australia; it isn't.

But you might say one boat a week is manageable for a large, wealthy country like Australia. Unfortunately, it isn't when they are being sent by profiteering criminals. Some simple mathematics is instructive²⁰. Just one boat a week, 52 weeks a year, 50 people on a boat, equates to 2600 people a year.

Should 50 boats a year arrive into Australia, we know from recent experience, that many more would follow. The numbers on the move globally are so large, and the profits to be made so attractive, that both smugglers and travellers would not stop, indeed did not stop, at 50 boats.

Furthermore, it is unreasonable to assume in our planning that Papua New Guinea and Nauru would simply keep accepting 50 boat loads of transferees into their Offshore Processing Centres, each year, year after year. Eventually, perhaps very quickly, these nations may no longer be prepared to provide settlement options to a continuing flow of transferees. Nauru after all has a population of only 10,000 citizens.

So from mid-December, as an additional measure, we have turned back boats where it is safe to do so. We have established safe and lawful operational procedures, consistent with our international obligations and domestic laws, and ensured a safe platform for return on each occasion.

Since then our efforts have focussed on:

²⁰ Drawing on a rough average of vessel occupancy rates over the last few years.

- safely turning back boats on the water;
- supporting Papua New Guinea and Nauru in their efforts to provide refugee status determination and settlement solutions; and
- continuing our upstream efforts to deter and disrupt smugglers, inform prospective travellers, and support partner governments manage a shared problem.

The result to date has been people smuggling ventures to Australia have failed and there is a very significant decline in the willingness of potential illegal immigrants to travel. There has also been no discernible post-monsoon surge.

To use the smuggling vernacular, 'the way to Australia is closed', and many, if not all smugglers and potential illegal immigrants know this. But people smugglers are opportunistic organised criminals, who do and will exploit any vulnerability in, or easing of, our border security arrangements. And they have shown resilience and a capacity to innovate in attempts to entice new clients and circumvent current measures.

Prospective clients are also looking for policy or operational changes, before risking their lives and money on a boat to Australia. At present, the great majority have decided to wait and see.

Australia has seized the initiative from the people smugglers. But to modify a well-known and very apt phrase, 'the price of border security is eternal vigilance'. Unwavering determination to stay the course is now essential. While the boats are stopping, with the flow very significantly diminished, the job isn't done. There will be surprises, disappointments and challenges ahead but we have come a long way.

Clearly the business of people smuggling to Australia is under great pressure, with much reduced prices, special deals, and some smugglers offering kids to travel for free: all this and more, to put people's lives at risk, in small boats on a large ocean.

I want to make the point here that our efforts are not just benefitting Australia.

Perhaps most importantly, the efforts of Border Protection Command have contributed to avoiding a significant number of deaths at sea that might otherwise

have occurred. This is something of which our Operation Sovereign Borders team can be justifiably proud.

The flow of irregular migrants into the region has clearly slowed. And some, typically the more affluent economic migrants, have chosen to return home. That said, to-date the benefits, while real, are modest. Substantially changing the irregular flow toward Australia, and drawing down the pool of potential illegal immigrants in transit countries, will require years not months of collective regional effort. More and more elements of this effort are now underway.

In Papua New Guinea, and very soon on Nauru, we are seeing the first Refugee Status Determinations being made, and settlement pathways being developed. These are very important steps and reinforce the principal message of Operation Sovereign Borders; the smuggler's way to Australia is closed.

Australia also continues to work with the region to support border management initiatives in order to strengthen the region as a whole.

Australian agencies support counterparts seeking to improve their own ability to manage migration in an orderly fashion. This occurs through assistance with migration policy capability, migration program management and border security management.

Conclusion

To conclude, reflecting on the broader global migration dynamics I raised initially, the ability of people to travel—through a range of both regular and irregular means—has never been greater. This trend shows no signs of abating. Much of that dynamic is of great benefit to our world and its people. But some criminals have made a living preying upon the vulnerable.

Together, over the last eight months, the Operation Sovereign Borders team has greatly disrupted maritime people smuggling to Australia. Business is down but smugglers will keep trying because they hope to turn a profit. As with combatting other forms of organised crime, our determination and long term perseverance is essential to effectively dealing with this wicked problem.

I hope that in time, Operation Sovereign Borders might allow renewed confidence in our managed migration program, and provide some clear air for Australians to think and talk together about our future as a nation of migrants, within a complex world.

Thank you.

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