



THE HON KAREN ANDREWS MP

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS

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TRANSCRIPT

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Topics: Launch of the Border Watch public information campaign; Morrison Government's strong track record on border protection; Safety of Parliamentarians; Australian sanctions on Russia.

TINA MACFARLANE: I'd like to thank everyone for coming this morning. This is a particularly important moment – it's the launch of the national Border Watch campaign. Minister Andrews has kindly come to launch this program, and I also welcome Assistant Commissioner of Australian Border Force Tim Fitzgerald.

KAREN ANDREWS: Well, thank you very much, Tina. It's a pleasure to be back in Darwin. It's a pleasure to be with you as our CLP candidate for Solomon, and it's a pleasure to be here with the Assistant Commissioner Tim Fitzgerald. Today is an important day. It marks once again the start of a campaign to alert people to the dangers of what may well be coming across our borders. Our borders have effectively been closed for the best part of two years – they are now open. We know that during COVID, a lot of illicit, illegal substances came across our border; there was an increase in drugs, there was an increase in weapons, there was an increase in tobacco that came through during COVID. We also are very acutely aware that now the borders are open there's likely to be a further increase in these goods coming into Australia. The Australian Border Force and the Australian Federal Police do a fantastic job, and I'm delighted that the Morrison Government has been able to specifically support those organisations – and in the case of the Australian Federal Police they are now funded to \$1.7 billion. That money goes towards making sure we are keeping our borders safe – not just from drugs, weapons and other illegal substances coming in – but also from things such as animal parts and pills, indeed a range of illicit substances coming into this country. Of course, we are all very mindful of the risks of people smuggling. We don't want there to be any ventures even contemplated in coming to Australia. Australians are very well aware of the success of the Coalition Government in stopping the people smuggling trade. We know that at least 1200 people died at sea previously under Labor's watch. I am determined as the Minister for Home Affairs that that will not happen again. But here today we are speaking about engaging with the community. We want the community to be aware that if they see something that is a bit odd, that is it a bit different, that looks a bit strange, that they are alerting Border Force to what they have seen. Because it may well lead to a successful prosecution, and some substances being taken off the streets – and that protects our community. I do have with me here Assistant Commissioner Fitzgerald, and I will invite him to make a few remarks in relation to particularly seizures that Border Force has made.

TIM FITZGERALD: Thank you, Minister. Thanks everyone for coming today. It's no coincidence that we are at the Cullen Bay Marina, and our thanks to Robbie for hosting us here today. The importance of marinas and the Australian community in assisting the Australian Border Force identify illicit activities across our borders is extremely important. Australia has 35,000 kilometres of coastline that we need to protect. Marinas such as this, our recreational fishers that use these marinas, workers at the marinas play a vital role in assisting the Australian Border Force identify suspicious activity and reporting that activity through to us so that we can then action and take effect in terms of placing our officers at the frontline in our borders to protect the Australian community. But the key here today is that the Australian community and industry have a part to play in that. We have approximately 24 district officers scattered across Australia trying to manage 35,000 kilometres of coastline. We can't protect the Australian border and the entire community, without the Australian community's help. In the last seven months through the Border Watch program we've had referrals that have resulted in the seizure of 1.4 tonne of illicit narcotics, 134 million sticks of tobacco, and over 200 firearms and firearm parts. Here in Darwin alone in the last couple of months we've had a seizure of over 7 million illicit cigarettes where the duty evaded on those cigarettes if they've circumvented our controls at the border would have been over \$8 million. So the message here today is that the Australian community and marinas such as here at Cullen Bay play an important part in protecting the Australian community more broadly from those illicit substances. Organised crime as the borders reopen will take advantage of the borders reopening, and the areas such as where we are here in northern parts of Australia will play a critical role in terms of them trying to get their illicit products and circumvent our controls at the board. As many locals will know, there are numerous boat ramps and airfields distributed in various areas of the region that only through locals will we know if there's something happening – a normal pattern of life that's not occurring, if there's particular people in a region that don't seem to be in that region for tourist-type purposes. And the criticality of those people, Australians, reporting that through to us so that we can then act has never been more important as we open borders. So the message, again, is the Australian community has a critical role to play in helping us protect the Australian borders as they reopen. So I'll stop there and obviously if there's any questions or queries, I think the Minister and myself are more than happy to answer.

QUESTION: What should fishers and the Australian community be on the lookout for? Is there anything they should sort of be wary of?

TIM FITZGERALD: Yeah, there's specific examples. So one of the situations that we quite regularly face along our coastline is what we call the 'mother-daughter' vessel scenario, where we have a mother ship leaving from a high-risk country – let's say South America – and that vessel transits through the south Pacific and then comes to the Australian coast. It may well be carrying a large quantity of illicit narcotics. A situation where what we call a daughter vessel will potentially depart from a marina such as this, a smaller vessel, going and meet the mother vessel, pick up the illicit narcotics and then come back in. Quite frequently, the person that purchases that smaller vessel will come into a marina like this. They might purchase the vessel using cash only. They might have no boating experience. They're the sorts of things that should stand out to local community and have that better understanding of what's normal in the region. Wildlife smuggling – if we've got tourists in areas that aren't traditional tourist-type areas, and it is bird breeding season, for instance, those sorts of things are what people should be looking for each and every day.

QUESTION: You speak about Australia's vast coastline. How do entry points in the Northern Territory compare to other jurisdictions?

TIM FITZGERALD: Certainly in the Northern Territory we've got a reasonable amount of coastline that we need to protect – without a doubt. And it goes back to that point around the value that recreational fishers play in identifying those areas where there are those remote boat ramps or remote airstrips for inland communities. So it's an important part. And Northern Territory is a key to organised crime as well. They will not always go through our traditional major capital cities because they know we do have a significant presence in those cities. So the key part to it is, again, that community and having the community understand that something's not normal and they have an outlet through the Australian Border Force and the Border Watch program to report that activity. And they can do that anonymously.

QUESTION: So pre-COVID were we seeing a fair proportion of that activity Northern Territory?

TIM FITZGERALD: Yes, without a doubt. As suggested – and even during COVID, as the example I provided illicit tobacco smuggling is a significant industry for organised crime. There is a lot of money to be made in illicit tobacco smuggling. That happens here in the Northern Territory just as it does in all other capital cities. So it is a critical part of it.

QUESTION: So is this campaign new? And how much is it being funded by? How much money is it receiving?

TIM FITZGERALD: So the Border Watch program itself has been around for a number of years. What we have noticed, though – and it's as a result of COVID to a degree – is that the number of referrals that we have been receiving have decreased over a period of time. We generally receive about 30,000 referrals on average over the last five years, but that has started to go down slightly. So the idea of this program is obviously to reinvigorate and make the community aware that they do have that reporting capability, and it is funded by the Federal Government in terms of being able to get out there the extra attention and media et cetera.

QUESTION: Are you able to tell us a little bit about some of the items that we have on show here today?

TIM FITZGERALD: Yeah, so there's a number of items on show today. Particular focus on the wildlife element. Wildlife is a risk, particularly here in the Northern Territory with some of the unique wildlife that the Northern Territory has. And there's a significant market for illicit wildlife smuggling which will start to increase as borders start to open and travellers start to come back into Australia. So that risk associated with illegal wildlife smuggling will increase over a period of time. Generally as we go forward we'll start to see as borders reopen and cargo routes and supply chains come back to some normality we'll start to see an increase in illicit tobacco, weapons and firearms and obviously border-controlled drugs.

QUESTION: The funding – I'm sorry, I've forgotten the figure – where will that money be going to?

TIM FITZGERALD: So a lot of the funding goes to obviously officers on the ground, the media campaign itself to raise awareness. There's a particular media campaign through obviously television and radio et cetera, again, that we're trying to get right across the nation to be able to demonstrate that understanding that the Australian community has a role to play in protecting the Australian border.

QUESTION: A couple of questions of the Minister, if that's okay?

KAREN ANDREWS: Thank you. Just before you do that, I might just add to the comments in relation to the launch of the program today. Whilst similar programs have been in place for some time, we

also know that we need to keep the awareness of these issues before the public. So this is \$2.6 million in additional funding that is going in to support this program. Now is a key time for us to be doing this because the borders have reopened. So we know that we are in a critical time frame at the moment. But over time we will continue to keep front of mind to people in Australia the risks with people smuggling, smuggling goods, with drugs come into the country. So we would not want to do just a one-off campaign. So this comes off the back of work that has been done previously, and it is a very clear signal that the Coalition Government will continue to roll out these campaigns because it's important, and we do need the support of the community to help us to idea some of the things that they're seeing in their own communities so that Border Force, the Australian Federal Police can take action.

QUESTION: Is there that fear that we could see more activity than what we've seen pre-COVID because there has been this gap for quite a while?

KAREN ANDREWS: Absolutely – and that's the significance behind a relaunch today – to make sure that we are keeping front of mind for people that our borders reopening have huge benefits to Australia but they also come with risk, in terms of people movement, movement of vessels, whether it be small ocean-going craft or whether that be aircraft coming in, will increase, and I pick up the point that was made earlier – yes, we are here at the marina, so we're focused on boats at the moment. But we do know that there are a number of privately owned airstrips that are being looked at make sure that we are aware of light aircraft in particular that might come into the territory or in parts of Western Australia and particularly the parts of northern Queensland. So we're very conscious that there is likely to be increased activity. It's much easier now to cross the borders into Australia, but there's many ways that you can get here. An enormous amount of coastline needs to be monitored, and parts of Australia are really quite remote and they're very open to people bringing in illicit substances.

QUESTION: Two people were yesterday charged with making online threats against Kristina Keneally. Do you have an update on the safety review for members of parliament?

KAREN ANDREWS: So I'll speak generally, rather than to specifics of any particular case. Parliamentarians – so Members of Parliament and Senators – are under an increasing risk in terms of them going about their work in supporting their communities. There was an incident recently in the United Kingdom that alerted us once again to the risks that we need to be monitoring here. So the Australian Federal Police, at my request, did some work to look at the safety of our Parliamentarians. Guidelines have been issued to all Members of Parliament – Members and Senators – irrespective of whether they are members of a major party, a minor party or are independents. They have all received guidelines as to the sorts of things that they need to do to keep themselves safe. A lot of that is what we would say to the community to keep themselves safe as well, when they just go about their work. But it is concerning, and as we head into a federal election campaign, we know there's going to be a heightened awareness of what is happening with Parliamentarians but also candidates – where they are and what they're doing. I am confident that the Australian Federal Police in the lead role that they are taking will be keeping us as safe as we possibly can be. But it is important that we are able to be out into the community and we are able to move about freely. And we will continue to do our jobs. That's what we want to do.

QUESTION: Minister, what will Australia do if China offers support to Russia? Will Australia impose sanctions on China?

KAREN ANDREWS: We've been very clear in what our views are in relation to the actions by Russia. It is clearly an invasion of Ukraine, and Australia has been very strong and we have supported Ukraine, but we have also lined up with our allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, and we have imposed sanctions. At this point in time our focus is on Russia. We will keep an open mind as this particular set of circumstances continues to evolve. So we won't rule anything out or rule anything in, but our focus is on Russia withdrawing peacefully from Ukraine.

QUESTION: Do you have an update on the number of visas that have been granted to Ukrainians?

KAREN ANDREWS: Well, there's an increasing number of visa applications that are being made. The circumstances around Russia and Ukraine is quite different to what we saw in relation to Afghanistan because we know that it is predominantly women and children that are crossing the border. In most instances they are going into Poland but not exclusively. So we do know that those people will want to return to Ukraine as soon as it is safe for them to do so. There are some people who have indicated they do want to come to Australia – either on a temporary basis or permanently. Alex Hawke as the Minister for Immigration has done a terrific job in processing the visa applications that we had on hand at the time that the invasion commenced. There is an increasing number of applications coming through, and we will continue to process those as quickly as we can. But at this stage I'm not prepared to reveal the number of applications that we have made, but we are working very closely to process them quickly.

Thanks everyone.

[ENDS]

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