

The Wrap

NEWSPIX



HELPLESS: Rescue volunteers unable to assist victims

Nothing could be done without equipment

Christmas Island residents give evidence on drowning tragedy.

The first person on the scene of last year's deadly boat smash at Christmas Island has told a parliamentary inquiry the island's volunteer marine rescue group had no equipment to help those drowning at sea.

Dozens of asylum seekers were killed when their boat hit the cliffs at Rocky Point in a fierce storm in the early hours of December 15 last year.

Locals who rushed to the scene of the crash tried to help men, women and children in the water by throwing lifejackets and ropes. Forty-two people were eventually rescued by the Navy.

Raymond Murray lives at Rocky Point and heard the screams of the asylum seekers as their boat edged closer and closer to the rocks.

He told the inquiry he is a member of the island's volunteer marine rescue but there was nothing he could do because the group has no equipment and its boat cannot be launched in bad weather.

"We were a volunteer rescue group by name only," he said.

"There is no trailer with all the things you would need in an emergency like that."

Mr Murray has called on the federal government to ensure members of the community on Christmas Island do not have to bear the responsibility of a similar situation unprepared.

"Obviously boats are going to come to this island," he said.

"We get huge storms here, and to set all that up and then not to follow it through with some sort of contingency or thing to deal with this – when you think about it, it was inevitable that it was going to happen."

Mr Murray was one of only a handful of residents to give evidence to the inquiry when it visited Christmas Island and he said he believed that many residents had "had enough".

He also complained that the media had been very invasive.

"I had one woman stand in the doorway of my house – I was on the phone – and when I excused myself from the phone to say no, I did not want to, she just carried on and walked in," he said.

Indian Ocean Territories Administrator Brian Lacy commended authorities and locals for the efforts and said he believed that everything that could be done was done.

But he said the tragedy also highlighted the need for more emergency equipment.

"Basically it was about ensuring that we had appropriate supplies of those pieces of equipment and resources and that they were of the more modern type, such as the grenade life vests," he said.

"I was not personally aware that there was such a thing."

Shire president Gordon Thomson said it would be helpful to have local people trained up to better deal with similar incidents.

"I reflect on why people are not coming today. Some have told me they do not want to be here," he said.

"The recovery of bodies from a wreck is a pretty traumatic job I would have thought."

Local divers were used to recover bodies from the water. •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/christmas_island_ctte/index.htm
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