

More staff, vessels target illegal fishing

Customs is getting 34 new staff and four tactical response vessels for key ports as part of a significant boost to border protection for Northern Australia by the Australian Government.

There are six new positions in Broome, six on Thursday Island and 16 deployed between Darwin and Gove, while six officers will oversee the program.

The new vessels will be based in Darwin, Gove, Thursday Island and Broome. They will patrol the inshore areas and be responsible for bringing apprehended vessels back to port. Announcing the increased resources, Customs Minister Senator Chris Ellison said, "I am confident the extra staff and boats will enable Customs and the Royal Australian Navy to apprehend more foreign fishing boats and crews for investigation and prosecution.

"Customs will assume responsibility for receiving foreign fishermen at arrival ports and transferring them quickly and securely to existing detention facilities in Western Australia and South Australia, pending the establishment of a new Darwin detention centre in mid-2006."

The package includes:

- \$57.5 million for Customs to introduce the new arrangements
- \$20.1 million for Immigration for increased detention and removal costs
- \$4 million for increased disposal costs
- \$2.2 million for the Director of Public Prosecutions to fund the expected increase in prosecutions
- \$5 million for extra operational and construction costs for a detention facility on Horn Island in the Torres Strait.

Senator Ellison said that Customs patrol vessels had carried out more than 1,000 boardings at sea in the past three years.

"Until now, the crews have only carried sidearms for boarding operations, and a rifle and shotgun for personal defence," he said.

"Recent experience has shown a growing trend in the unwillingness of some illegal fishing boats and other vessels suspected of criminal activity to comply with requests to be boarded.

"In order to deal with this more aggressive approach and evasive manoeuvring by intercepted ships, our Customs vessels and their crews clearly need to be both better protected and equipped to deal with these potentially hostile situations off our coastline."

Customs vessel crews will undergo additional training and two additional crew members will be embarked on each vessel to operate the weapon, taking the standard Customs vessel crew to ten.