

JOINT MEDIA RELEASE



This is a joint release between the Australian Border Force, Sri Lanka Navy, Sri Lanka Police, and Sri Lanka Department of Immigration and Emigration

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10 years of Operation Sovereign Borders

This week in 2013, the Australian Government established Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), a military-led operation to address the scourge of criminal people smuggling activities organising dangerous maritime ventures targeting Australia.

Commander Joint Agency Task Force Operation Sovereign Borders, Rear Admiral Justin Jones, CSC, RAN remarked that before the establishment of OSB, Australia saw more than 50,000 people arrive on more than 800 boats, and tragically, more than 1200 people died at sea.

“It was a watershed moment for Australia – a joint agency model was required to further strengthen Australia’s efforts to tackle the issue head on,” Rear Admiral Jones said.

Under OSB, potential illegal immigrants have zero chance of getting to Australia by boat, and since 2013, 1082 people from 46 people smuggling boats have been returned to their country of departure or their home country.

The success of OSB has also been shaped by cultivating deep relationships with regional partners.

“I often say that we are not alone in this fight. We’ve built strong relationships across the region, and Sri Lanka is a gold standard partner in that regard. Their efforts to deter and disrupt maritime people smuggling ventures continue to play a significant role in reinforcing our resolve to dismantle this criminal trade,” Rear Admiral Jones said.

Sri Lanka Navy Commander Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera observed that the OSB model has added to improved detection capabilities through information sharing and capacity building initiatives.

“Thanks to Australia’s broad development support to Sri Lanka, like the Vessel Monitoring System, solid-state radar units, vessel search equipment, regular rhythm of engagements, along with deep commitment at our end, we’ve heightened our awareness of the maritime domain, as well as preventive actions,” Vice Admiral Perera said.

In 2022, approximately 1189 Sri Lankans were detained by Sri Lanka Navy while attempting an illegal maritime journey to Australia.

“We cannot be complacent. There is still plenty to be done in educating vulnerable Sri Lankans about the dangers and repercussions of these illegal journeys,” Vice Admiral Perera added.

Key to this education is the *Zero Chance* anti-people smuggling communication campaign, which informs, educates and deters vulnerable Sri Lankans from undertaking a dangerous and futile maritime journey to Australia. This includes a 60-day annual *Zero Chance* roadshow, which engages communities across the country.

Two roadshows, conducted in the first half of 2023, saw a total of 30,000 people engaged, the majority of which were first-time attendees.

Rear Admiral Jones said research conducted during the roadshows pointed to a high degree of awareness among Sri Lankans of Australia’s tough border protection policies.

“Ninety-seven per cent of those surveyed had a strong awareness of Australia’s policies on illegal maritime migration, including Australia’s regional processing arrangements. It was also observed that there was a fifty per cent reduction in intent to illegally migrate to Australia, compared to 2022. Whilst these metrics are largely positive, it does emphasise that the work never ceases. I commend the dedication of our Sri Lankan partners in extending the reach of the *Zero Chance* message to various socio-economic groups in Sri Lanka,” Rear Admiral Jones said.

Commenting on the importance of community outreach, Senior Superintendent of Police, Sri Lanka Police Media, Attorney at Law, Nihal Thalduwa said, “Community policing is a strategy that speaks to our mission of creating a *peaceful environment to live with confidence*. Supporting the Australian Government’s *Zero Chance* campaign, through close interactions with the public, helps improve dialogue between our officers and citizens. This leads to better audience receptiveness, which sets the conditions for changing behaviours.”

Sri Lanka Controller General of Immigration and Emigration, Harsha Ilukpitiya remarked that educating communities on both the pitfalls as well as the legal pathway is vital to stemming the flow.

“Getting the balance right is important. Whilst we need to stress on the dangers and futility of illegal maritime migration, there is also a need to provide information about the legal migration pathways to Australia – the latter of which complements our role in ensuring citizens and non-citizens are lawful in their movements across our borders,” Mr Ilukpitiya said.

“Even though we mark 10 years of OSB, I cannot stress enough that this is an enduring capability – Australia’s border protection policies have not changed and will not change. Do not fall for the tricks of people smugglers. Do not believe their lies. The only way to Australia is with a valid visa. Those who try to come illegally will be caught, returned to Sri Lanka, and will forfeit any chance of ever coming to Australia in the future. You have zero chance of success,” Rear Admiral Jones added.

For more information on Australia’s border protection policies, visit www.australia.gov.au/zerochance