

# New role in offshore protection for Customs

By Ian Polson

Australian Customs is playing a major role in the new Joint Offshore Protection Command, which is strengthening Australia's offshore maritime security.

Australia is progressively implementing a series of linked initiatives throughout this year, including two of the recommendations in the Taskforce on Offshore Maritime Security's report:

- establishment of a Joint Offshore Protection Command (JOPC)
- development of the Australian Maritime Identification System.

The Command provides an integrated whole-of-government approach to maritime security and dedicated patrols of Australia's offshore oil and gas platforms.

Customs and the Australian Defence Force have come together in a joint command, building on the existing Coastwatch functions of Customs, with Defence providing the command and control for those situations where civil-enforcement tasks escalate quickly into situations requiring counter-terrorism and/or lethal force response.

The Director General Coastwatch Rear Admiral Russ Crane is Commander of the joint operation, accountable to the Chief of Defence Force for military offshore maritime protection functions and to the Chief Executive Officer of Customs for the conduct of civil maritime surveillance and regulatory functions.

Headquarters of the Command is based alongside Coastwatch in Canberra and comprises staff from Customs and Defence. One of the early challenges is to build a more comprehensive single picture of all activities in Australia's maritime approaches to support proactive action aimed at deterring potential aggressors against our offshore oil and gas platforms.

To achieve this, the Command is developing an Australian Maritime Identification System that will provide Australia with

the necessary knowledge of maritime units approaching and transiting Australia's offshore maritime areas to carry out a threat assessment.

The system will adopt a graduated approach, seeking information at 1000 nautical miles about vessels proposing to enter Australian ports; at 500 nautical miles about vessels proposing to transit Australian waters and, at 200 nautical miles, identification of all vessels, other than day-recreational boats, within Australia's exclusive economic zone.

The information collected will include vessel identity, crews, cargoes and ship movements. The system will be a single point of collation and dissemination for information that is already provided to a range of government departments by commercial shipping agencies and other users in the day-to-day business of maritime transportation.



An Australian Customs patrol boat and tender.