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Media Release

The Hon Philip Ruddock, MP
Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

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DROWNING TRAGEDY HIGHLIGHTS HAZARDS OF PEOPLE SMUGGLING

The recent disastrous drowning of more than a dozen illegal immigrants, believed to be Sri Lankans, has prompted the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock, to issue a strong warning to people smugglers.

“These tragic deaths should not only deter anyone considering entering Australia illegally, but also highlight the unscrupulous behaviour of people traffickers”, the Minister said.

The unauthorised arrivals left Indonesia in one boat, accompanied by an unladen vessel. At a predetermined point, the crew on the boat carrying the Sri Lankans transferred to the accompanying boat and returned to Indonesia, leaving the Sri Lankans stranded.

“Rough seas sank the Sri Lankans’ boat and although five men were saved by a yacht, one definitely drowned and fourteen others are missing presumed drowned” the Minister said.

“The two boat procedure is becoming more common, and there is really only one outcome likely when inexperienced people are left at the mercy of the Indian Ocean.”

“This incident is not unique. There has been at least one other drowning we know of, from the boat codenamed *Paroo*, which arrived on 24 December 1998. Unseaworthy vessels are common, so it may be only a matter of time before we witness another similar tragedy.

“To date this year, almost nine hundred people have arrived in Australia illegally by boat, many through people smuggling rackets.

“Today, legislation which I introduced to strengthen the penalties for people smuggling has come into effect. As a result, the maximum fine has increased to \$220 000. In addition, sentences have increased from 2 to 10 years, or up to 20 years where more than 5 people are involved in the smuggling racket.

“These strengthened penalties highlight this Government’s commitment to deter future people smugglers, and put an end to these shameless rackets” Mr Ruddock concluded.

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