

STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION

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The published and broadcast footage this week of a small Royal Gibraltar Police RHIB shadowing a large and robust Guardia Civil patrol boat following another incursion has driven home the point that Gibraltar's maritime capability should have been upgraded by now. This was something that the Government had promised to do in June of last year, nearly a year ago.

It is totally unacceptable that the size and capacity of the maritime resources available to the RGP and Gibraltar's other maritime agencies continues to be manifestly inferior to those available in the area to the Guardia Civil at sea. The footage which was released to the media last week by a member of the public showed a large Guardia Civil vessel provoking a small RGP launch. The Guardia Civil is an armed paramilitary organisation. It was clear from the footage that the Civil Guard even engaged in sharp turns at speed next to the RGP so that the waves from the wake produced by their patrol boat affected the stability of the much smaller Gibraltar RHIB. It is a tribute to the professionalism and courage of the RGP that they continue to deploy to counter the Civil Guard in these circumstances.

In the budget debate of last year, the Chief Minister told Parliament in response to comments made by Opposition spokesman Dr Joseph Garcia that the Government intended to acquire "vessels of a much more important size and capacity with which to exercise and enforce our jurisdictional competences and our statutory obligations." Mr Caruana explained that even though the upholding and defence of the sovereignty of Gibraltar's waters was the constitutional responsibility of the United Kingdom, the Gibraltar Government certainly had jurisdictional competence for official acts in Gibraltar waters. He added that the Government was "certainly intending to upgrade our investment and to make much more senior our assets to uphold them".

When questioned on this point later on by Dr Garcia during the Committee Stage of the budget, Mr Caruana said that there was provision for these vessels in the estimates "only in the most notional sense" making it clear that "there is not substantive provision for them".

Five months later, in October last year, Dr Garcia asked the Government how many larger vessels it intended to purchase, at what cost and which department these vessels would come under. The response was that these matters were then currently under consideration. In February 2010, at the last question-time, Dr Garcia again asked whether a policy decision had now been taken on the subject. The answer was that none had been taken but that it was still the policy of the Government to purchase the vessels.

The Guardia Civil have continued their incursions since the intention of the Government to increase their maritime resources was made public. The most serious of these was an incursion into the Port and onto the land territory of Gibraltar itself in December of last year. The time that it has taken the Government to match their words with action over this issue is a matter for concern. There could be another serious incident one day and the Government have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that their maritime sections have the senior assets of a more important size and capacity that the Chief Minister identified were required last year.