



Australian Government

Department of Home Affairs

# Introduction to Country of Origin Information (COI)



Presented by the Country of Origin Information Services Section (COISS)

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# Agenda

- What is country of origin information?
- Why is COI important?
- Policy
- About the Country of Origin Information Services Section (COISS)
- COISS Products and Services
- CISNET
- Questions

# Session outcomes

- Understand the meaning of 'COI research'
- Understand how COI research is used in protection obligations assessments
- Understand the role of Country of Origin Information Services Section (COISS) in providing COI
- Develop basic skills in using the COI resources available for relevant information when considering applicant claims
- Understand how to search and submit requests in CISNET
- Comply with the Ministerial Direction 84: Consideration of Protection Visa applications (DFAT assessments) and the COI Procedural Instruction (on Legend).

# Introduction to COI

- COI research is a specialty that is practised globally
- COISS adheres to the internationally acknowledged principles of COI
- COISS comprises of 17 specialist COI researchers, each focusing on a country or a region
- COI is an important part of refugee and humanitarian decision making and COISS researchers are trained to provide high quality COI tailored to the needs of decision makers
- CISNET is the department's COI database – if COISS writes it or cites it, it's on CISNET!

# What is COI

- COI is information which relates to an applicant's claims for protection about the countries where they fear harm.
- COI relates directly to grounds for protection in the Refugee Convention and Complementary Protection obligations, as given effect by the *Migration Act 1958*, including (but not limited to):
  - Race, religion, nationality, particular social group, political opinion
  - Cultural and social norms
  - State protection
  - Relocation
- COI can also help with:
  - Determining the credibility of an applicant's claims
  - Preparing questions for the interview
  - Providing in-country context to an applicant's claims

# Sources of COI

- Local media
- Global or international media
- Inter-governmental organisations (UNHCR, IOM)
- Non-government organisations (Amnesty, HRW, Freedom House)
- Church and religious organisations
- Special interest groups
- Academic sources
- Australian government and foreign government agencies (DFAT, USSD, UKHO)
- Open-source, Unclassified

# Role of COI

- Decision makers need to refer to COI throughout the assessment process.
- COI should be considered when assessing a range of questions, including:
  - The credibility and plausibility of claims put forward by an applicant
  - Whether an applicant's subjective fear of persecution has an objective basis (well-founded fear)
  - Whether there are areas in the country where the applicant would not face persecution
  - Availability of state protection
  - If a particular social group exists (is the group socially recognisable in the society).

# A quality refugee decision

The quality of a protection obligations assessment depends **largely** on how well a decision maker has used **COI** (factual evidence) to support their findings.

Correct use of COI leads to:

- A good decision

What is a good decision?

- considers breadth/scope of all COI available/weighting

Incorrect use of COI may lead to:

- incorrect assessments
- inconsistent outcomes for cases involving similar circumstances
- findings of judicial error by the courts.



# COI that must be considered

- Two types of COI **must** be considered in decision records:

1. COISS products and CISNET holdings

*Procedural Instruction: Use of COI Procedural Instruction*

2. DFAT Reports

*Ministerial Direction 84: Consideration of Protection Visa applications*

# Remember to always...

- Use the most up-to-date COI
- Use of the most recent COISS Common Claims document if one is available at the time of the decision
- Use sufficient COI in assessing all material
- Weigh conflicting COI in decision records
- Accurately footnote as per the requirements in the Procedural Instruction.

# Policy about COI

- The *Use of COI Procedural Instruction* was updated in 2018 and is available on LEGEND: [Policy – Refugee and Humanitarian – Use of Country of Origin Information](#)
  - The policy requires Protection Visa (PV) case officers to take into account relevant COISS products and CISNET holdings in their PV decision records.
  - Case officers are required to demonstrate they have considered information in COISS products and where they take a different view, articulate this in their decision record.

# Policy about COI

## What does this mean for you?

- You can rely on the professional researchers in COISS to conduct thorough COI research on your behalf.
- You can still come to your own conclusions about COI. However, you must demonstrate you have considered information in COISS products in your decision record and articulate reasons for any deviations.
- Relying on COISS for COI means you can spend more time on other aspects of decision making.
- You can still do your own research, but you must use CISNET. Only minimal fact-checking should be done outside of CISNET.
- You can cite COISS products directly. The same way you would cite any other COI source.

# Ministerial Direction 84: Consideration of Protection Visa applications

Ministerial Direction 84 states:

*Where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has prepared a country information assessment expressly for protection status determination purposes, and that assessment is available to the decision maker, the decision maker must take into account that assessment, where relevant, in making their decision. The decision maker is not precluded from considering other relevant information about the country.*

Decision makers **must**:

- » demonstrate, in the decision record, that they have taken into account relevant information from a DFAT report.
- » Decide how much weight to accord to DFAT reports.

DFAT reports are available on CISNET and can be provided to applicants on request.

# About COISS

COISS manages the Department's research program in consultation with its stakeholders. COISS officers are located across Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.



# COISS Products

COISS produce the following products that are available on CISNET:

- **Q&A Responses:** research responses to questions relating to individual protection visa cases
- **Common Claims:** targeted to the most identifiable and common claims raised in caseloads
- **Thematic Briefs:** targeted to a particular protection issue or theme raised in caseloads
- **Situational Updates:** address emerging trends or shift in COI that may impact on a particular caseload
- **Resource Guides:** package of major COI reports for bigger country caseloads
- **COISS Conversations:** delivered via skype, enables COISS research officers and PV decision makers to exchange real time country information on high priority protection caseloads.

# COISS Services

- **Monitoring** human rights issues across the globe
- **Maintain CISNET** to ensure it is up-to-date at all times
- **Upload documents to CISNET** by request (subject to suitability)
- **Send cables** to posts
- **Research requests** (Question and Answer service)
- **Ad hoc briefings** for business areas and Executive
- **Training** and assistance



# The role of COISS

- COISS researchers are trained to assess and present COI on the basis of: *relevance, currency, reliability, accuracy, traceability and transparency*.
- COISS provides information. COISS does not provide: risk assessments, findings, or statements of future likelihood.
- COISS researchers cannot advise case officers to make a particular decision or finding.
- COI research can sometimes be inconclusive or return no information. Where possible, COISS will provide context where specific information is not available.


# The role of decision makers

- Background reading: COISS papers and CISNET, other reports and papers
- Develop a research strategy which involves formulating research questions. To do this decision makers must:
  - Have a good understanding of the current legal and policy frameworks for assessing protection claims
  - Examine all the information on the applicant's file
  - Familiarise themselves with background information on conditions in the applicant's country of origin.
- Decide what tools and services to use to locate COI.
- If unsure, ask a COISS research officer.

# CISNET

- The Department's country information database.
- Contains roughly half a million documents.
- CISNET was recently upgraded to make it more intuitive and user friendly.
- Access CISNET via the Bordernet homepage.

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# On CISNET you will find:

- **DFAT:** Country Information Reports, Thematic Reports, cables
- **COISS products:** Common Claims, Thematic Briefings, Situational Updates, Resource Guides, Q&A responses
- **Media:** local and international news articles
- **Foreign government reports:** US Department of State, UK Home Office, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
- **NGO reports:** Annual reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Freedom House
- **UNHCR reports:** Return advisories, UNHCR eligibility guidelines
- **Other COI reports:** academic reports and studies, journal articles, maps, legislation, audio/video clips and more

# Searching CISNET

- Basic Search
- Advanced Search
- Filtering search results

*Practical Exercise: How to browse and search for information on CISNET.*

# Research Requests

- Express Q&As
  - 24 hrs from receipt of request for time-critical decisions
  - Limited to 1-2 factual questions
- Standard Q&As
  - 4 days from commencing research
  - Up to 3 questions

*Practical Exercise: Let's submit a research request in CISNET.*

# Request a document upload

- Completed within 24 hours of allocation.
- COISS will assess information prior to uploading to CISNET.
  - All information must be relevant, current, reliable, accurate, traceable and transparent.
- Not fit for CISNET – file it in client's file on TRIM.

*Practical Exercise: Let's request a document be uploaded to CISNET*



# Where can I find help?

Tip sheets and short instructional videos are available on the Help and Training page on CISNET. These will help you to:

- Navigate CISNET
- Carry out basic and advanced searches
- Submit a research request
- Submit a request to upload a document.

# Contact COISS

- Country of Origin Information Services Section (COISS)

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- CISNET issues

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# Thank you for listening

## Any Questions?