12th October 2009

The Secretary
Senate Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs
Parliament House,
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I listened with some interest to an ABC radio interview that Senator Trood did that went to air about 4.20pm on Thursday 17th September 2009. The interview was about the work that he was currently doing in his position as deputy Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and the particular subject matter that he was looking into at this time was the matters of border issues between Australia and Papua New Guinea. According to this interview the Committee are seeking information from the public and other relevant authorities that will assist them to come up with recommendations about how the border with PNG can be better controlled and monitored. This to better protect the local inhabitants as they cross the border to legitimately visit each other but also to better prevent illegal activities and border crossings which result in unwanted problems for Australian authorities.

This subject is of some interest to me as I worked on a project some years ago that was in part to address these very same issues. A lot of time and some Australian money was spent on this project at the time but it has all came to nothing in the end and was dead and buried within a few years of its conception. I write to you about it, as it was a project that I believed had a lot of potential to address the very issues that you are now looking into. Needless to say, these issues have been looked into before and the result in part at least, was the project that I was involved with.

The project that I was involved with was known as the South Fly Telecommunications Project. It was funded by AusAid to the tune of some A$3.5 million. At the time, I was working for Telikom PNG, the 100% Papua New Guinea Government owned Telecommunications Company. I worked for them for some 23 years from 1978 to 2001. Telikom PNG was asked to design and implement the project and I was appointed the Telikom PNG project manager for this task. Along with others, I carried out the work on this project over a period of some four years from 1998 through to 20001 when the project was finally closed off. The base network was completed in 2000.

The primary focus for the telecommunication network was to provide border communications between PNG and Australia so as provide better monitoring of the movement of people across the common border. A secondary benefit of this project was to provide simple telecommunications to villages in a previously neglected area of PNG. The area from Daru to the PNG border with Indonesia is mainly low lying land covered in large areas by seasonal swamps and river deltas. It is an economically depressed area and as such had not warranted telecommunications services up until this time.
As Telikom PNG Project Manager for this system, I had a lot to do with the final design of the network that focussed on these two primary objectives..
The network was designed not only to fulfil the primary and secondary requirements but a third feature was developed as the project progressed. It was designed with the capability of reducing movement across the border by enabling PNG families living in villages on the PNG side of the border to communicated directly with their relatives on the Australian side of the border living on nearby islands in the Torres Straits. With this facility in place there would be less reason for people living in the border area to cross the common border if they could simply talk to each other on a common communication network. With less local people crossing the border, the movement of people from outside the local area could be better monitored. Local persons on both side of the border would able to use the network to report the movements of outsiders to responsible authorities on both sides of the border, thereby making illegal border crossings more difficult.
In the final plan, local villagers living on the either side of the border were to report their movements through an office that was to be established in the village of Mabaduan, on the mainland of PNG, not far from the Australian islands of Saibai and Boigu. Construction of an office and some houses were started for the staff that would man this office but regretfully the houses were never completed. The construction was funded to some extent [if not entirely] by AusAid, I believe, but was not part of my project..

The South Fly Telecommunication Network was successfully designed, purchased, constructed and commissioned, within the approved budget. Regrettably, within about 2 years of completion, the network was no longer functioning.
The reasons for this are essentially that no one wanted to maintain the network. AusAid only saw their role as providers. It was to be the responsability of PNG to maintain the network. The PNG Government delegated this responsability to Telikom PNG but as this network was not a revenue generating network, they would not maintain it unless funds were forthcoming from somewhere. Telikom PNG was by this time, a commercial entity which was being primed for privatisation. As a commercial entity, they did not see it as part of their responsibility to maintain networks that did not generate revenue. Funds were sought from various arms of the PNG Government to maintain the network, but these funds were not forthcoming. In the end, the network "died from starvation."

Also, regrettably, the network never realised its full potential due to an uncompromising attitude on the part of Australian authorities located far away from the area in question in the southern states of Australia. The network was designed using the 70 MHz radio frequency band as its primary means of a radio carrier. [It used the Tait MPT1327, trunked radio technology.] This was not an issue in PNG but became an issue with the

Australian authorities. This frequency band was no longer available for fixed or mobile communications in Australia by the time the project was completed. While the reasons for this were quite understandable in most urban and rural areas of Australia, these reasons had little relevance in the remote islands of the Torres Straits. Radio frequencies are not affected by borders, and if they are being used on the PNG side of the border, they will find their way to the Australian side of the border. In fact this feature was designed into the network. Unfortunately, due to the lack of flexibility in the Australian radio licensing system, they would not allow the village subscriber radio sets to be used on the Australian side of the border. The result of this lack of flexibility meant that the third feature of the network could not be implemented. Without being able to implement the third feature, villages from either side of the border would continue to make regular border crossings. The proper authorities on both sides of the border could not readily monitor these movements either and importantly there was no direct communication link between authorities on both sides of the border. To communicate with each other required making a call via the South Fly Network to Daru, then be switched via the Telikom telephone exchange in Daru over the satellite link to Port Moresby; then be switched via the gateway exchange in Port Moresby via another satellite or undersea cable link to Sydney from where the call might be routed back up to Thursday Island or possibly one of the other island in the Torres Strait.

All this complexity, simply because an exemption to Australian regulations could not be made for a special case situation. Had this third feature been implemented at the time, I have no doubt that there would have been more interest in maintaining the network, to the extent that the network might still be running.

The network not only was designed for use at fixed village sites but was also capable of being used by mobile users i.e. in boats. In this mode it would have been an asset to mobile border patrols as well.

I believe that there may have been a mobile communication network implemented on the Australian side of the border at some time after the PNG project was completed but it was not made available to people on the PNG side of the border. As such it failed to full fill a vital requirement of any communication network along a border...namely that in these remote environments, it should be available to those living on both sides in order to reduce border movement. Travelling between villages on either side of the common border between PNG and Australia is not only expensive for the local inhabitants but is also hazardous. The boats they have use either petrol [which is expensive and hard to get] or sail which is reliant upon favourable winds. The boats are often in poor condition, overloaded and not sea worthy. On one of my trips through the area by boat, we came across an overloaded motorised dingy drifting as they had run out of fuel. There were women and children on board and no live jackets to be seen. We gave them fuel to continue on their way. They were travelling from a village in PNG to one of the Australian Islands. This trip may not have been necessary, if they could have talked to each other on a communication network.

My objective here is not to lay blame with any party in particular for the ultimate failure of the South Fly Telecommunication Project but simply to point out to you that the kind of things that you are trying to achieve today have been tried before and the results of those efforts can be seen rusting in the coastal villages along the PNG coastline. [In the

course of this project 5 free standing towers ranging in height from 70 meters to 130 meters were built from Daru to Bensbach. There were equipment shelters and solar power systems installed at each of these sites. There were an some 30 additional smaller towers constructed at village sites for the subscriber radios.] New efforts to achieve similar results will also not be successful unless there is a commitment by parties on both sides of the border to maintain the infrastructure and policies that they implement.

Yours faithfully

Graham Smith