

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr JULL (Fadden)(5.42 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's interim report entitled *Visit to Bougainville 15-18 March 1999*.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr JULL —by leave—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I have great pleasure today in presenting the report of a visit to Port Moresby and Bougainville made by a delegation from the committee from 15 to 18 March 1999. The report is an interim one in the sense that the visit was conducted as an integral part of the committee's current inquiry into the Bougainville peace process and a later, full report to parliament is foreshadowed. That report will include specific recommendations on the basis of the formal evidence which the committee is in the process of gathering. The report I present today describes the program of meetings, informal discussions and inspections which the delegation conducted during our recent visit. The report also outlines the delegation's observations and presents some preliminary views and conclusions.

Within the limitations imposed by time and distance, the delegation's program was a busy one. The delegation met with most of the key participants in the peace process, except for the resistance leaders, who were unfortunately not in Bougainville at the time of the visit. The delegation members had an invaluable opportunity to be exposed to a very broad range of perspectives, and we were able to see for ourselves the actual situation in Bougainville.

Apart from the enormous human tragedies of the war in Bougainville, there has been an almost total destruction of the province's political, economic and social infrastructure. Restoration of basic communications and reconstruction of health, education and other essential services are huge tasks which will take many years and will require considerable ongoing external aid. The committee report comments on a number of Australian aid programs in Bougainville and highlights some areas where additional assistance might be needed.

From the visit, the delegation gained considerable insights into the problems being faced in advancing the peace process. While travelling around Bougainville, the delegates were able to observe first-hand some of the evidence of the destruction that has resulted from the war—for example, the rusting remains of destroyed buildings, abandoned or overgrown homes and plantations.

Our meetings and discussions gave the delegation confidence that the peace process has almost universal support and that the next phase will concentrate on determining the mechanisms for restoring civil administration. The delegation was pleased to note that, since mid-1997, a great deal of progress has been made towards resolving the protracted conflict in Bougainville. Today, Bougainville is relatively calm and, although there have been isolated killings, there has been no major fighting for almost two years. The daily lives of Bougainvilleans are beginning to return to normal, and freedom of movement has considerably improved. However, there is only limited trading and other commercial activities in evidence, apart perhaps from a brisk trade in scrap materials. As elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, there are law and order problems in some areas of Bougainville.

After more than nine years of violence and armed conflict, the momentum for peace appears to be firmly on the agenda for the people of Bougainville and their leaders, despite occasional setbacks. There are very positive signs that the peace dividend is showing results in very practical ways and that the peace process is continuing to move forward.

In conjunction with other regional countries, Australia has made a major contribution to advancing the peace process through political and diplomatic efforts, through Australia's very large aid program to Papua New Guinea, and through the work of the peace monitoring group. Australia's pivotal role, in conjunction with other regional countries in encouraging the momentum for peace, is acknowledged. However, there is potential danger in becoming complacent about the progress towards peace. Continual vigilance is needed to maintain a focus on the desired outcome of enabling Bougainvilleans themselves, in partnership with the central government, to determine their own future. This outcome is in Australia's national interest as well.

The delegation wishes to thank the Papua New Guinea government, in particular the Speaker of the national parliament, the Hon. John Pundari MP, and senior government ministers for extending the invitation to the delegation, for their courtesy and hospitality during the visit and for the opportunities to exchange views quite freely. These thanks extend also to senior opposition members and to the Bougainvillean leaders and community groups. Their contribution to the discussions and the frankness with which views were able to be exchanged were very much appreciated by the delegates.

The delegation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the Australian High Commissioner in Port Moresby, His Excellency Mr David Irvine, and his staff for the assistance provided both before and during the visit. All the arrangements made for the busy program were excellent and contributed significantly to the success of the visit. The delegation also expresses grateful thanks to the former commander of the PMG, Brigadier Bruce Osborn, ADF, who accompanied the delegation throughout the visit and who provided valuable insights into the role of the PMG and its contribution to the peace process.

The delegation travelled to and from PNG by means of regular RAAF supply flights undertaken by No. 37 Squadron. In every sense, these arrangements were excellent. The efforts of the flight crew were very much appreciated by all the members of the delegation. In Bougainville, the PMG provided air, sea and land transportation for the delegation as well as detailed briefings and overall facilitation of the visit program. To the commander, Brigadier Roger Powell, and to all the PMG personnel, the delegation expresses its grateful thanks for their professionalism, enthusiasm and support during the visit. Finally, I would like to thank the delegation members for their assistance during and after the visit. I commend the report to the House.

Dr THEOPHANOUS (Calwell)(5.49 p.m.) —by leave—As deputy chairman of the committee and of the delegation, I would like to applaud all the comments made by the honourable member for Fadden and also congratulate the members of the delegation for the work they did. I also want to emphasise the importance of the peace monitoring group which is, I think, quite unique in terms of peacekeeping groups around the world, and it is doing a tremendous job. I think it is true to say that the group, which is primarily Australian orientated in terms of participation, although there are people from Vanuatu, Fiji and New Zealand, is doing an excellent job on the ground. I believe, and I think most Bougainvilleans believe, that without that group on the ground doing that job we would not have proceeded as far as we have in terms of the peace in that situation.

The political discussions that we had both in Bougainville and in Port Moresby reinforced the view that, although significant differences exist about Bougainville's political future, people are determined to try to achieve and continue on the path of peace. One of the factors which is most important in relation to that path of peace is the forthcoming election, which is due to be held in mid-April. Whether it will be held in mid-April is not clear yet, but that election is of critical importance to the future of Bougainville.

Interestingly, most groups in Bougainville wish to participate in that electoral process, although there are some that are raising objections of a constitutional nature to it. It is very

important that Australia encourage the election to proceed, and the report actually says that, notwithstanding the fact that there has not been total disarmament, we nevertheless support the idea of these elections proceeding so that an interim assembly and government can be formed for Bougainville whose major purpose will be to negotiate a political settlement with the government of Papua New Guinea in terms of outcomes.

This leads me to the other matter which I think is very important if there is going to be political agreement in both Papua New Guinea and Bougainville. That is, it is important for proposals to be put forward in relation to an autonomy package for the province—that is to say, proposals about the kind of constitution that will exist for the province and the kinds of powers which the regional Bougainvillean government is going to have vis-a-vis the central government.

Most of the people we spoke to, even those who were not supportive of this election—such as the opposition at the national level—agreed that it was very important to develop these proposals for an autonomy package. I think this is the factor which, after the elections in April, will determine whether or not the people of Bougainville can come together in a unified way and also whether a resolution can be made with the government of Papua New Guinea. Australia should do whatever it can to assist politically to ensure that this process is further developed. In fact, if there is anything Australia can do in providing expertise to assist this political process, we ought to do so.

The key players in the Bougainville crisis have all committed themselves, as the member for Fadden said, to a path of peace. They no longer want war. They want to redevelop Bougainville and they want to go forward to provide the basics of health, education, transport and many other ordinary things of life for their people. They have recognised that, notwithstanding their differences of a political and constitutional nature, they want to develop Bougainville and they do not want to return to the destructive path which existed before. The vast majority of people support the idea of some kind of election which will be fair and democratic. In this respect, I hope the elections will proceed in this way and achieve that aim. One of the chiefs in Haku gave us a copy of his speech, and I think it is worth reading the closing part of it to sum up the aspirations of the people of Bougainville. He said:

We are asking all leaders not to play politics with our future. Peace is so close and yet so easily thrown away by a careless word. We ask for your support for the peace process as agreed so far. Please do not look for reasons why this process cannot work. Join hands with us to help it work, to make it work. Join hands with us to help the people of Bougainville and their families and their children to enjoy the peace that you happily can take for granted. Do not help those who would tear down what we have built so far. All we ask is that you give peace a chance.

I think that sums up the aspirations of the people of Bougainville. This is a very important report and I commend it to all members.

Mr JULL (Fadden) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks when the debate is resumed.

Leave granted; debate adjourned