

House of Representatives, Monday 24 February 1997

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr SINCLAIR (New England)(12.41 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's reports entitled *Papua New Guinea: Proceedings of a seminar, 11 and 12 November 1996*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received in the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr SINCLAIR —It is opportune that there is even a brief time to speak about Papua New Guinea in light of events that have come to note over the weekend. Last week Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Downer) visited Papua New Guinea. Immediately on his departure it became apparent that they are apparently involved in what seemed nothing less than an extraordinary venture—more pertinent to a Frederick Forsyth novel, I suspect, than reality. There is involvement of a group called Executive Outcomes under their subsidiary Sandline International, with some 140-plus mercenaries. This will reputedly cost the government of Papua New Guinea something like \$36 million for reported covert operations against the BRA in Bougainville.

It had been my hope to perhaps move a motion at this time addressing the problems that I think beset both Australia and Papua New Guinea. I trust that the government of Sir Julius Chan takes note of what, I have little doubt, is a widespread concern within Australia at the character of this action. I hope Sir Julius and his ministers understand that, while we recognise their total independence as a sovereign state, affairs that occur in Papua New Guinea do impact on us here. There is a great concern about events of this sort that introduce into this region some of the worst aspects of African solutions which, tragically, have failed in every one of the countries they have been pursued there.

I would like to specifically say to Sir Julius, whom I know and respect, that I am very disappointed in the nature of this action. I trust that the reports can at least be eased by his deciding not to proceed with the employment of these covert mercenaries in the way that is reported.

I wanted very briefly to refer to this report. It is five years since the original report Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea was tabled by the committee. It is only two years since the report Bougainville: a specific solution was tabled. This seminar was an update essentially of the former. In particular, I would like to thank the Papua New Guinea High Commissioner, Brigadier General Kenneth Noga, and Vice Admiral David Leach, President of the Australia Papua New Guinea Friendship Association, for their participation. I would also say to the other 100 persons who are involved with them—under the able chairmanship of my colleague, the chair of the foreign affairs subcommittee, the honourable member for Groom (Mr Taylor)—that they are involved in a very worthwhile discussion on events not just on Bougainville but right across the whole field of PNG.

It needs to be remembered again by the government of PNG that the more action that takes place on Bougainville the less regard is taken of the very real problem that extends right across the whole of the PNG economy. In fact, the seminar dealt with political and economic security and social and health issues. I have no time to go into the details, but the report itself does identify and produce 14 recommendations. In particular, there is one recommendation that I think the House needs to take note of. Recommendation No. 14 states: the Australian Government recognise the significance of Papua New Guinea in its foreign policy priorities and acknowledge through the maintenance of the AusAID and Defence Cooperation Programs the unique challenges that PNG faces . . . in developing its infrastructure.

We should express, particularly, our concern that the Bougainville crisis should be resolved peacefully.

There is no prospect of a military solution to Bougainville and the government of PNG needs to recognise that. That conclusion was reached not just from the seminar but also from our earlier report on a peaceful solution in Bougainville. I spoke about the tragic assassination of Premier Theodore Miriung of the Bougainville transitional government only a fortnight ago. I identified the fact that attention has to be taken of the views of women and there has to be recognition of the recommendations of that peace conference in Arawa last year. I would like to see the timetable that we outlined in our report on a peaceful solution for Bougainville identified and pursued by the government of PNG and asserted by the government of Australia.

On behalf of the committee, I give our thanks not only to the chair of that seminar, the honourable member for Groom, but also to the secretariat of the committee—in particular Margaret Swieringa, Jan Fuhrman and Cliff Lawson, who arranged that very sensible event and drafted the report.

Mr BRERETON (Kingsford-Smith)(12.46 p.m.) —I am pleased to speak briefly on the tabling of the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on its seminar into our relations with PNG. Once again, the joint committee and its very professional secretariat have produced a valuable document which should advance public understanding and debate on what is a very important aspect of our overseas relationships—in this case, a relationship which has unique breadth and depth, but which is also, as we have seen from today's headlines, a relationship with very significant tensions and difficulties, particularly in respect of the intractable conflict on Bougainville.

Two weeks ago in the House, as the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair) has said, we unanimously adopted a motion that he moved concerning the tragic assassination of the Bougainville Premier, Theodore Miriung. That motion very appropriately urged the Government of Papua New Guinea and the members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army to renew the reconciliation process; to end all human rights abuses; to restore the rule of law on the island; and to accelerate the urgently needed reconstruction process.

It was only three days after that, on 13 February, that Foreign Minister Downer applauded the PNG government's support for a negotiated settlement on Bougainville by extending the mandate of the Bougainville transitional government, saying that he would use the opportunity of his forthcoming visit to PNG to pass on congratulations to Prime Minister Chan and other PNG ministers. On 19 February, the foreign minister followed up with a \$4 million announcement of overseas aid funds to buy and distribute essential goods and medical supplies to the people of mainland Bougainville.

These were very encouraging developments and the foreign minister's visit to Port Moresby should have marked a significant step forward. But what we now have to hand, of course, are these very disturbing reports that the PNG government is gearing up for another military offensive on Bougainville and this time bringing in foreign mercenaries—that is, professional freelance killers—to assassinate the very people the PNG government must talk to if there is to be a lasting peace settlement of the conflict.

I know all members of this House would agree that this development casts a very grim pall over hopes for a peaceful settlement of this tragic conflict. As I said yesterday, all Australia is appalled by the gross abuses of human rights carried out by the PNG defence force troops on Bougainville. The employment of foreign troops in what amounts to a brutally conceived assassination plot will only exacerbate the conflict. It will deal a devastating blow to any prospect of peace. It will also set a very disturbing precedent for the use of foreign military forces in the South Pacific. Even if the planned operation does not proceed, great damage has

already been done—the credibility of the PNG government is in tatters, as I fear is the peace process itself.

The foreign minister and the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) have reportedly warned PNG against further military action on Bougainville. They must do so again in the strongest terms. Prime Minister Chan must be told directly and bluntly that the employment of foreign mercenaries will result in the immediate suspension of our bilateral defence cooperation program and a review of our aid program to PNG. Members will be aware that our overseas aid to PNG is the subject of a bilateral treaty and our defence cooperation is governed by a number of understandings and agreements. But if the PNG government decides to proceed with this crazy plan, then we should not hesitate in putting the fundamentals of the bilateral relationship right on the line.

This murderous conspiracy that appears to have been floated is one quite beyond the pale and all Australian people will demand that we have no connection, however indirect, with it. Australia requires from the foreign minister a guarantee that not one dollar of Australia's bilateral aid to PNG is going directly or indirectly to the hiring of this crew of Rambo-like assassins.

Finally, the report of the joint committee tabled today reaffirms the view that there can be no military solution to the conflict on Bougainville. It recommends that the Australian government encourage the PNG government to invite international observers, something we heartily endorse. I add that the Australian government should also press PNG to allow the international media access to Bougainville for, perhaps more than ever, the international spotlight must be shot on this appalling conflict. For too long the war on Bougainville has remained in the shadows. One positive thing that might emerge from this latest publicity is that the spotlight will be well and truly turned upon them.

Mr SPEAKER —The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the right honourable member for New England wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr SINCLAIR (New England) —Yes, Mr Speaker. I had considered widening the motion in view of the very serious developments in Papua New Guinea but I shall leave that and put it on the Notice Paper under private members business. I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

Mr SPEAKER —In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting. The right honourable member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.