

BOUGAINVILLE : THE WAY FORWARD

Government Response by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the Report of the Parliamentary Delegation to Bougainville, 8 June 1994

The Government warmly welcomes this report of the Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Bougainville, 18-22 April 1994. Australian Ministers first raised the idea of such a visit at the PNG-Australia Ministerial Forum held in Mt Hagen last December. Our PNG counterparts reacted positively to this proposal, and in February this year Prime Minister Wingti conveyed his Government's formal agreement during his visit to Canberra.

We proposed the visit against a background of widespread concern, not only in Australia but in other parts of the world, about the intractability of the conflict in Papua New Guinea's North Solomons Province, about humanitarian conditions on the island, and reported human rights abuses to which the conflict had given rise. We repeated the view expressed on a number of occasions that a long term solution to the Bougainville problem could not be achieved by military means, and suggested that an independent examination could be an important contribution towards genuine efforts to bring the conflict to an end. This objective made it desirable that the delegation include a broad range of political affiliations, which it did. That the delegation's report is a unanimous one is all the more welcome; its unanimity makes the report itself all the more compelling.

The delegation's visit has been very successful in two important respects.

The first of these is in having provided an authoritative eyewitness account of the current situation on Bougainville, and in providing the Australian Parliament and the Australian community with access to the views of ordinary Bougainvillean men and women, unfiltered by spokespersons seeking to promote the views or cause of any side. The delegation makes clear in its report its overwhelming impression that the people of Bougainville above all desire peace and a return to normal life. In doing so the report also helps to

dispel some of the misrepresentations which propagandists have promoted, especially here in Australia. I refer, for instance, to allegations which

continue to enjoy some currency, including among some groups which should know better, that PNG government-run care centres for displaced Bougainvilleans are nothing but concentration camps; that PNG security forces are engaged in some kind of hostile occupation of the island; and that the BRA continues to enjoy widespread support in the province. This report has given no comfort to any of those claims. At the same time it gives a very succinct account of the very complex and diverse nature of Bougainvillean society which is often overlooked in quick assessments of the situation.

Secondly, the delegation visit has, I think, itself served to encourage renewed PNG efforts to seek out a peaceful solution. This report provides useful suggestions as to how a peace process might develop on the PNG side, while at the same time stating a possible basis for an appropriate Australian contribution to the process. It does not lay down a prescriptive, detailed blueprint for peace, but clarifies the very real issues that do need to be addressed. It underlines the importance of Papua New Guinea's friends being prepared to play a supportive role in facilitating a peaceful resolution of the problem, and it provides a basis for further discussions with the PNG Government on ways in which that role might best be developed.

However much we might want to help, the fact is that no amount of shouting from the sidelines can enforce peace on Bougainville. The Australian Government remains convinced that no lasting resolution of the Bougainville problem is possible unless the parties involved themselves want to reach a resolution, commit themselves to doing so, and assume responsibility for maintaining a resolution once it is reached. In Bougainville, as in all other aspects of the relationship, Australia cannot, and should not and will not try, to solve Papua New Guinea's problems for it. That is why Australia's position has always been that it would not be appropriate for us to seek a primary role in mediating or brokering a peaceful resolution on Bougainville.

But that does not mean that there is no role for Australia. The delegation's report makes, as I have said, a number of sensible suggestions in this regard. In particular it suggests that Australia might offer to facilitate talks between

the parties. The Government welcomes this recommendation; indeed, such an offer has been on the table for some time, and was renewed most recently at the highest level during Prime Minister Wingti's visit to Australia in February.

The Government endorses the delegation's belief that humanitarian considerations demand that the PNG government explore, as a priority, ways in which basic humanitarian supplies such as medicines and clothes can be delivered to all parts of Bougainville. The Government believes such a gesture would also represent a significant step in the process of rebuilding confidence among the various parties on Bougainville as a necessary foundation for a lasting resolution.

As the report notes, Australia clearly has a role to play in assisting the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the province. Again, this is an area where the Australian Government is already active, with over \$7 million already spent or committed for relief and rehabilitation activities in North Solomons Province, both through government agencies and NGOs. We are prepared to devote additional resources to this area, and \$7.5 million is notionally set aside for this purpose. But it is important to note that the scope for delivery of significant additional assistance does depend, to an important degree, on an improvement in the security situation in the province. This in turn will depend on progress towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. And, as I said previously, this is something for which all parties bear a responsibility.

The Government endorses the report's recommendations in relation to the issues of human rights and accountability. Again, the report does not seek to be prescriptive in terms of process, but offers helpful suggestions in identifying those issues it perceives must be addressed, including in particular the need for all cases to be dealt with equally, and the need to respect traditional Bougainvillean compensation processes. The Government warmly welcomes the announcement by Prime Minister Wingti on 31 May that Papua New Guinea is to establish a national Human Rights Commission, and an associated Police Complaints Unit in North Solomons Province. I have no doubt that the delegation's visit and its meetings with senior members of the PNG government, including the Prime Minister, have been a factor in this decision. The delegation's report recommends that, should Papua New Guinea decide to establish a national Human Rights Commission, Australia be

prepared to give technical advice and assistance to a PNG Human Rights Commission using the resources of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. We will be happy to ask the Commission to do that.

No-one should trivialise the very real difficulties in the path of those seeking to bring an end to the Bougainville conflict. North Solomons is not the only province in Papua New Guinea suffering from shortages of essential supplies; the PNG government's resources are not infinite; communications are limited; the conflict is complex, and divisions are deep and numerous; and the expectations of many are unrealistic. But this does not detract from the judgement that the conflict has gone on too long. And it is clear from the report of the delegation that this view is very widely held on Bougainville too.

Those parties who remain opposed to PNG sovereignty in the North Solomons are faced with a choice: to continue pursuing their political objectives through violence and intimidation, or to set these aside in the interests of allowing ordinary Bougainvilleans to resume their normal lives, to educate their children, to cultivate their food gardens, to plant their crops, and to travel freely. Compromise must be seen to come from all sides.

It is the Government's sincere hope that the delegation's report will encourage *all* those involved in the Bougainville situation to think more seriously about peace, and about the steps needed to bring it about, and to take at least the first of those steps without waiting for others to set the pace.

The Government has, in this respect, welcomed the recent confirmation by PNG Foreign Minister, Sir Julius Chan, that he has held discussions with South Pacific nations on ways in which they might help to bring an end to the conflict. It may be that, depending on the task envisaged, Australia could play a role in supporting a small regional peace keeping force, established to facilitate a peace process: this has not yet been put to us as a detailed proposal, and we await further elaboration of the concept. We would certainly consider any such proposal very sympathetically.

These recent moves do signal a renewed willingness on the part of the PNG government to devote more attention, and more resources, to bringing about an end to the Bougainville conflict by peaceful means. I have encouraged Sir

Julius to persist in this endeavour, and most warmly welcome the latest news that senior level talks took place in Honiara last weekend between PNG officials and representatives of the BRA and its associates.

The task of this Australian delegation was not an easy one, in light of Australia's historical relationship with Papua New Guinea, and a degree of controversy surrounding Australia's continued financial assistance and defence support to the PNG Government. But Senator Loosley and all the other members of the delegation carried out their task with sensitivity, diligence, and a high seriousness of purpose. The Government commends all members of the delegation and those officials who supported them for their commitment in this important exercise.

I also wish to place on record my particular appreciation for the efforts of officers of the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby, who made a significant contribution to the success of the visit, in planning and overseeing what was a particularly complex logistical exercise, involving helicopter transportation in difficult terrain and what, regrettably, remains an uncertain security environment.

The success of the visit would not have been possible without the active cooperation and assistance, at the highest levels, of the PNG Government and its officials, the civilian administration of North Solomons Province, and the PNG security forces. I would like to take this opportunity formally to register the Australian Government's sincere thanks for this, and in particular to express my appreciation for the personal interest of Prime Minister Wingti and Deputy Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan, both of whom received the delegation following its return from Bougainville on 22 April, and who have continued to take an intense interest in its report.