

Senate, Monday 24 February 1997

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator MacGIBBON (Queensland)(4.13 p.m.) —I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Papua New Guinea update—report on proceedings of a seminar 11 and 12 November 1996, Canberra*, together with minutes of the proceedings. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to this report.

Leave granted.

Senator MacGIBBON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I have pleasure in presenting this report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on a seminar on Papua New Guinea held in November last year in Canberra. The seminar provided an opportunity for the committee to review developments in Papua New Guinea and the bilateral relationship with Australia.

It is five years since the committee tabled a very comprehensive report on Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea and in that time much has changed. As much as possible, people and organisations involved in the original inquiry were asked to attend and, all up, some 100 people with an interest in Papua New Guinea participated. I would like to thank, in particular, the Papua New Guinea High Commissioner, Brigadier General Kenneth Nogar and Vice Admiral David Leach, President of the Australia-Papua New Guinea Friendship Association for their support for the seminar and for the contribution they made.

The seminar examined political, economic, security and social issues, and this is reflected in the final report and its 14 recommendations. The seminar also devoted considerable time to the Bougainville situation, and, of course, the dreadful assassination of Theodore Miriung, Premier of the Bougainville transitional government, was still fresh in people's minds. The tragedy on Bougainville continues, and a number of recommendations regarding it are made in this report. Much has been said in the parliament about Bougainville and the continuing difficulties there.

The seminar report contains a time line showing the development of a crisis and it is instructive for those interested in the subject. The hope that existed in 1994 was, unfortunately, short lived and the violence has continued at an alarming rate with deaths not only amongst the BRA and the PNG defence force but increasingly among the population. In section 4 of the report, the committee notes:

Any examination of the ebb and flow of the conflict on Bougainville would suggest that the PNG Government should return to the strategies that were developed under Sir Julius Chan in 1994-95. This was not without its frustrations or its setbacks but it was the most peaceful period of the conflict so far and the time when most of the BRA support was whittled away. It was apparent to all who attended the seminar that neither side in the conflict will be able to achieve a military solution. There needs to be a cease-fire and peace talks if any progress is to be made. The committee has recommended that international observers, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or the International Commission of Jurists, be stationed on Bougainville to give greater protection to the population and encourage greater discipline in the defence forces.

Over the weekend we learned of the quite extraordinary and alarming situation of the hiring of between 50 to 150 mercenaries to assassinate people in Bougainville. This is not the time to debate this matter here, but it would be remiss of me—on behalf of the committee—not to draw attention to it in public. This is entirely alien to the practices of this part of the world, particularly for New Guinea. Whatever problems Papua New Guinea has at the present time, it is basically and fundamentally a very democratic society. It might be a society based on

tribalism and regional loyalties—and that has been one of the problems it has faced in forging a new nation state—but, basically, it is a very democratic society.

While there has been conflict between the different groups, the introduction of mercenaries in the form of something akin to the Executive Outcomes group and Sandline International is something that everyone in Australia would find quite extraordinary and quite alarming.

Australia, of course, recognises that Papua New Guinea is a sovereign state and its affairs are its own matter, but we cannot stand idly by and see the employment of assassination groups to solve what are essentially political problems.

I have a very great respect for Sir Julius Chan whom I have known personally for probably 18 years. I am astonished that he could be party to an agreement like this. But he ought to be advised of the fact that people like Executive Outcomes or any of the mercenary armies have never achieved any satisfactory outcomes where they have been employed in Africa.

Tragically, I have been in parts of Africa and seen the dreadful human rights abuses and the rest of it that mercenary armies do cause.

The details of what is going on in New Guinea at the present time are obscure to some degree, but it does seem to be beyond dispute that between \$35 million and \$50 million has been spent in recruiting these mercenaries. This is not something that happened overnight; they just did not get off a plane. The planning for that and the recruitment of them—signing them up to contracts—would have taken at least two months and probably quite a bit longer. It is clearly a premeditated move by the Papua New Guinea administration. A point not lost on Australia is that, given the desperate financial position of New Guinea, the \$35 million to \$50 million obviously involves quite a large proportion of Australian aid money, which is a position that all of us would find quite intolerable. I do not wish to debate this much further, because it is something that we will certainly be returning to in the Senate to debate at length and in detail in the near future.

I would like to conclude by thanking all those involved in the seminar for their contributions: the member for Groom (Mr Taylor), who chaired the seminar so well; the members of the committee who were able to attend; government officials; academics; representatives of NGOs; business and community groups; and the many individuals in Australia who have an abiding interest in Papua New Guinea and its future welfare. I would also like to thank the secretariat of the committee, particularly Margaret Swieringa, Jan Fuhrman and Cliff Lawson, who arranged a very successful event and drafted the report. I commend the report to the Senate.

Senator BOURNE (New South Wales)(4.20 p.m.)—I find myself in the unique situation of agreeing with almost everything that Senator MacGibbon has said, which does not happen very often. But I think that what he said was very good and that people should take note of it. He is exactly right.

I attended the seminar and I was also a member of the delegation that Australia sent to Bougainville in 1994 to see what Australians could do to try to help solve the situation there. The one thing that we found everybody agreed on, after we had been to the island and travelled around the island as much as we could, was that there is no military solution to this problem; there has to be a negotiated solution where everybody has to sit down and talk about it; and they have to come to some agreement which is a non-military agreement.

I would have to agree absolutely with what Senator MacGibbon has said about mercenary armies. They just do not work. It does not solve anything. The government of Papua New Guinea—if this is truly the case—will have spent a great deal of money, an enormous amount of money. They will have created more problems for themselves through human rights abuses which will inevitably occur when mercenary armies are involved and through the international outcry because this has happened. There will be murders; there will be deaths—

not just of the people that the PNG government must want to see got rid of if they are employing a mercenary army, but also of many other people.

It seems almost inevitable that there has been a move such as this. The international condemnation that must follow this and must follow the results of this will be absolutely massive. It is in nobody's best interests, least of all those of the Papua New Guinea government. I was shocked when I heard it myself. I have known Sir Julius Chan only since 1994 when we were over there and I met him and spoke with him quite a bit. I was really quite shocked when I heard the rumours that this has happened. I have read today the press reports on what has happened. What Senator MacGibbon has said is pretty well what I have read as well.

I must say that I find this extraordinary. I just do not believe that any good can possibly come of it in any way whatsoever. The seminar came up with some very good conclusions and recommendations. I think I can say that the general feeling on Bougainville from the seminar was that no military solution is possible and that we have to look at ways that we can assist in finding a negotiated solution. That is still the case, and that will remain the case well and truly until a solution to the problem in Bougainville is found.

Senator MARGETTS (Western Australia)(4.22 p.m.) —If the mercenaries are called Executive Solutions, it is unfortunately very similar to the Holocaust being called the final solution. It is about killing. It is about people who are paid to kill—and they are very good at it. This is certainly not an issue that has been thought of only in the last few months. I asked questions on notice and questions without notice of then Senator Gareth Evans, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, back in 1994. There were already reports then that two Australians were involved in mercenary forces.

I asked questions last year as well in relation to mercenaries. In 1989 there was an amendment to the Crimes Act which meant that it was no longer an offence under the Australian Crimes Act for Australian ex-military personnel to be involved with or recruited as mercenaries or for companies like Executive Solutions or any others to come to Australia and recruit Australians if necessary.

We do not know who this band of mercenaries are. What we do know is that the Australian government, of whichever type, has never been able to confirm or deny whether Australians are involved amongst the mercenaries, perhaps because of their knowledge of the Australian equipment used by the Papua New Guinean defence forces or captured equipment used by rebels, the BRA or so on.

It was in fact in 1994 that Sir Julius Chan made a statement about routing out the rebels in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere. I made statements about that. We kind of wondered whether or not there would mercenaries in other countries—countries seeking out members of the BRA, BIG or supporters of those people in Bougainville who were asking for a just solution.

I agree with those people who say, again and again, that there cannot be a military solution. I have spoken to the Senate before about my attending a conference of women last year, which was very important for me, who came from both sides of the blockade. They had not seen each other or spoken to each other for years. If there was a message that came out, it was that there will be no solution in Bougainville until there is justice—that is, justice in relation to land, to the environment and to the people.

Up to 10,000 lives—through various means such as starvation, lack of medical resources and deaths—through all sides in the conflict, is too big a price to pay if Australia's support is largely about the commercial support of a mining operation by CRA. That is not worth 10,000 lives. Nothing could be worth 10,000 lives.

The parties do speak of land justice. It is true that the majority of people in Bougainville want peace, but they also want self-determination. I am not just talking here about radical voices

within Bougainville. The late Theodore Miriung came to Australia to give that message to Australia. He spoke at a lecture at the Australian National University and said that peace is certainly desired, but self-determination is on and never has been off the agenda in Bougainville. There are two messages there: there will be no final peace without justice, and self-determination is on and never has been off the agenda in Bougainville.

Whatever the Australian government decides to do now, I urge that that be part of our presentation whenever we speak to the Papua New Guinean government. Australia is the largest donor of aid to Papua New Guinea. The concept that it is not possible for Australia to review the aid that we send on the basis of whether or not it is going to where it is specified to go is bizarre. It is well overdue that that review was made. If there are areas within Australia's aid which are going in the wrong direction—that are going in areas that have not been specified in the conditions by which that aid is given—then Australia must take action.

Much of Australia's aid is not going to poverty alleviation. One can only wonder whether the latest \$4 million does actually go for emergency relief. In the light of, perhaps, \$30 or \$60 million being spent in setting up paid guns to murder people for money, then I think it is certainly time for the Australian government to make a strong stand—not just to talk strongly but to say, 'Look, we're not funding this any more. We are not putting taxpayers' money into continuing murdering people on Bougainville.'

Question resolved in the affirmative.