

Joint Press Conference with the Hon. Peter O'Neill CMG MP, Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea

PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

Thank you very much for joining us here this afternoon. And firstly let me extend our appreciation to the Prime of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, for his first official visit in his capacity as Prime Minister to Papua New Guinea on this occasion. I hope you have a pleasant stay here and of course we look forward to many more discussions over the course of today and tomorrow.

But also let me take this opportunity to extend our sympathies to many of the victims of recent Cyclone Debbie in Australia especially our neighbours in Far North Queensland. Papua New Guinea understands the suffering that they are going through. We have similar experiences here by many cyclones that we continue experience in our country.

Today, Prime Minister Turnbull and I discussed many issues that affect our two countries. The bilateral relationship between our two countries is very strong and continues to strengthen each year. We have discussed a number of issues including of course the Manus Resettlement Processing Centre, the ongoing work that is going on at that Centre in order for us to have a closer, in accordance with the Supreme Court decision that was handed down by the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea.

Work is progressing quite well, the processing of the refugees is going on quite well and we appreciate the continued support of the Australian Government in managing that facility. Of course we spoke about ongoing trade and investment issues between our two countries. Australia is by far the largest investor in Papua New Guinea and as such we understand the role that they play in continuing to strengthen the investment confidence that Papua New Guinea continues to enjoy.

Our economy has been doing quite well over the last 15 years except of course for the commodity prices affecting our revenues over the last couple of years. Other than that the economy continues to grow well above global standards and I think that will continue to encourage more and more investment from Australia and businesses that are doing business in Papua New Guinea.

We also extend our appreciation to the Australian Government especially the DFAT support on many programs that they have in the country; in education, in health, supporting our defence, law and justice sector and many infrastructure that they continue to help us build in many of these sectors.

And again we spoke about APEC which Papua New Guinea will be hosting in 2018 and Australian Government's support in providing security so that our leaders

who are going to come and visit us on that occasion feel safe and comfortable. Papua New Guinea is a safe destination and I know that all the leaders will enjoy their stay here with us.

A range of meetings relating to APEC has already taken place in our country. Of course close to 200 meetings will be conducted in PNG before the Leaders' meeting in November 2018. Those policy discussions are going very well and again we appreciate the support of the 21 economies who are actively participating in these discussions.

Papua New Guinea is going to an elections in a few days time, a few weeks time, which will be on April 20th. Australian Government is supporting us in the logistics and capacity building within the Electoral Commission. They will be also participating as international observers in our election process throughout many parts of our country. Our aim is to try and deliver a free and fair elections according the people's will. Secondly the support that has been extended to us by the Australian Government is going towards achieving that goal.

So once again Prime Minister, thank you very much for visiting Papua New Guinea on this occasion. I hope you have a pleasant stay and we'll look forward to seeing you again here in 2018.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you very much Prime Minister and thank you so much for the very warm welcome and the very, very generous hospitality that we've received. You started your remarks Prime Minister by expressing your sympathy for the victims of the cyclone and floods in Australia, in North Queensland and indeed right through Queensland and into northern New South Wales and I thank you for that.

The solidarity between the people of Australia and the people of Papua New Guinea was evident today at Isurava and Bomana. We see 75 years ago people of Papua New Guinea, Australians fought side by side to keep Australia free, to defend Australia from invasion, to defend Papua New Guinea from the invasion of the Japanese Imperial Army. Those bonds that were built then are enduring and they have grown into a very deep relationship. We are fundamentally connected by the breadth of our common interests. Our economic relationship which you spoke about Prime Minister brings huge benefits to both countries. Our bilateral merchandise trade was worth \$5.8 billion in last year, more than 5000 Australian companies do business in PNG. We have more than \$18 million Australian investment in PNG, this is indeed greater than, considerably greater than our investment in Indonesia. So it gives an indication of the scale and the depth of the relationship with PNG and I look forward in the course of the day as we were discussing Prime Minister and tomorrow, meeting with and discussing the economic relationship with PNG business leaders, entrepreneurs, Australian business leaders working here in PNG. It's a very, very powerful and growing economic partnership. We also work very closely on security and ensuring stability in our region. We talked about our extensive dispense and police cooperation on border security combatting the scourge of people smuggling.

We are both committed to free trade and open markets and of course PNG's hosting of APEC in 2018 is going to be a very important opportunity to promote continuing regional economic integration for the benefit of the whole region. We've discussed the cooperation that we are pursuing to ensure the success of the event. We've also talked about the importance of protecting the security of the maritime resources of PNG and we're going to do more in that regard to cooperate and support PNG to protect its vitally important fisheries from illegal fishing.

I want to thank you Prime Minister for your Government's continued cooperation in this vitally important fight against people smuggling and we will continue to work together to close the Regional Processing Centre by the end of the year and I want to thank you Prime Minister for Papua New Guinea's significant progress on the resettlement of refugees from Manus.

So Mr Prime Minister we first met I recall at the NRL Grand Final in Sydney back in 2015 and I know that that game too, that code has a special place in the ties between our countries. So I'm looking forward as I know you are to the Prime Minister's XIII Game to be held in Port Moresby later this year. Rugby League is another special bond between Australia and PNG.

So I want to thank you Prime Minister for your commitment to the strong and strengthening relationship between our two countries and I'm confident that building on the foundations of solidarity, solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds that we were reminded of this morning in those solemn places of memory and history. I'm certain that building on those our relationship will grow even stronger in the years ahead. Thank you Prime Minister for welcoming us to PNG.

JOURNALIST:

Mr O'Neill, could I ask your federal budget is under considerable pressure at the moment from the commodity crisis. Is there more that Australia can do to help PNG with that?

And secondly, are you seeing any positive signs for the resettlement of refugees from Manus as a result of the United States' agreement with Australia?

PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

Well certainly your first question [inaudible] resource dependent economy all around the world. We had our share of some challenges. That meant a huge reduction in our revenue [inaudible] and of course we had to readjust our budget to ensure that we fit to the revenues of course that we were experienced in the last two years. What is the Government that we picked our funding priority you still welcome; health, education, infrastructure, law and order, the budget was never, we simply cut only non-priority areas, projects that needed to be deferred has been deferred.

And your question about what are the Australian Government should continue to assist support budget. Australian Government is already doing enough to the

federal support that they give in that involvement in funding through DFAT. And that is now supporting many of the priorities of Government as well; health, in health, education, law and order and justice, so I think we're doing as much as we can.

We also have [inaudible] challenges that the Australian economy is facing and we will continue to work together to ensure that our economies continue to flow.

But despite those challenges that we [inaudible] again. The Papua New Guinea economy continues to grow above global stimulus. Both [inaudible] that particular problem.

JOURNALIST:

On Manus? Manus Island?

PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

On the issue of the resettlement of course we will be guided by Australia Government on their arrangements with the United States and we can resettle many of the refugees to a third country like United State in the future we welcome.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Turnbull, you said significant progress has been made on Manus. Were you referring exclusively to the US deal because here as I understand only about 15 men from Manus have been resettled at Papua New Guinea. There's a big question coming from inside the Papua New Guinea Government about what's going to happen to those men who don't go to the US with resettlement here hasn't seemed to work.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it's clearly worked with a number of cases. The Prime Minister and I talked about that earlier, but we are as you know there is a program of resettlement, a process of assessment for the purpose of resettlement in the United States underway. We look forward to the conclusion of that work by the United States authorities.

JOURNALIST:

How many cases have worked here Prime Minister? How many cases have worked in Papua New Guinea?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the Prime Minister would be better able to nominate a number but we talked about the number of successful cases here.

PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

There are some refugees already been resettled on PNG. Many of our local businesses have already put up their hands to try and take on as many professionals who are able to work in PNG but as you know many of the refugees are not willing to settle in PNG. We cannot force people in a resettlement exercise when they are not able to accept our offer. But if a third country is willing to accept their resettlement we are quite happy to participate [inaudible].

JOURNALIST:

Can I just clarify you'll only [inaudible] take by United States [inaudible]?

PRIME MINISTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

We will continue to manage the joint [inaudible] over the course of close negotiations.

JOURNALIST:

When you announced the deal with the United States Mr Turnbull you said that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees would help administer the deal. They have said quite emphatically that integration and resettlement for these people is not possible in Papua New Guinea despite [inaudible] attempts in that regard. So what, your Department has said that you are negotiating with many other third countries. So what is the plan for those who aren't taken to the United States?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well let's take it one step at a time. We have succeeded and I thank the Prime Minister for his cooperation in doing this. We have succeeded in stopping the scourge of people smuggling which as we all know, we all recall tragically under the Labor Government resulted in 50,000 boat arrivals, 1200 deaths at sea which we know.

Now we've succeeded in stopping those people smugglers and that has been a great humanitarian achievement. We are working to solutions, enduring solutions of people who have been detained here and Nauru. Working with third countries, most notably of course the United States to that regard. We'll take this process one step at a time.

JOURNALIST:

Is Nauru a possible destination for those who don't go to the United States?

PRIME MINISTER:

We'll take this process one step at a time.

JOURNALIST:

[inaudible]

PRIME MINISTER:

As the Prime Minister has acknowledged, Australia's aid to New Guinea is very substantial. PNG is the largest recipient of Australian aid – very much so as you know – it's a very substantial amount, over half a billion dollars a year. It's supporting health, education, empowerment of women and girls, infrastructure a whole series of programs throughout the country. We talked about the new hospital under way, so we've worked very closely in partnership with the Government on PNG and the Prime Minister which enables us to ensure that we get the best outcomes for the aid for which the Prime Minister has acknowledged is substantial and understands the commitment of the Australian people to support the development of PNG, our closest neighbour.

[ends]