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MR. WHITLAM'S APOLOGIA

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. Whitlam is clearly trying to extricate himself from the result of those indiscretions which have led native leaders in New Guinea to tell him to pack up and go home and cease fermenting trouble.

The facts are that Mr. Whitlam made a flying visit to a troubled area - the Gazelle Peninsula. Once there he engaged in ill-considered demagoguery and increased the chances of trouble and violence in that area. He deepened and worsened the divisions among the Tolai people - divisions which the Government has been seeking to heal. He spoke to one section of the Tolai people and left the impression, in an unsophisticated area, that he and the people of Australia supported not only the aims but the methods - including violence - to which that section has resorted.

He refrained from calming the fears felt by some of the Tolai that their land may be endangered by the multi-racial Council. Yet he must know this fear to be baseless.

He must have known that the Administrator and Government officials were subjected to violence when they went to the area to "listen" and to discuss this problem. Yet he publicly admires the "fervour" of those who used that violence.

Either through foolishness or by design he has made a difficult situation worse. He has refused to support what he calls "technical legality" and has instead tacitly encouraged clearly illegal action. If this results in greater violence and Australia's name is thereby damaged he will to a very large degree be responsible - if responsible is a word which can properly be used in relation to his actions in this matter.

The Government will seek to remove the fears felt by a section of the Tolais, to relieve the difficulties in the region, and to repair the damage done by this visit. But this will now be more difficult.

CANBERRA
12 January 1970