

FOR PRESS:



P.M. No. 74/1970

CABINET MEETS TO CONSIDER GAZELLE SITUATION

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Federal Cabinet met today to consider a series of reports from the Administrator of Papua and New Guinea.

The reports indicated that the Administrator faced a serious, potentially dangerous situation on the Gazelle Peninsula in New Britain.

The situation has come about in the following way. The Administration bought land on the Gazelle Peninsula in order to subdivide it and distribute it among Tolai and Baining indigenous people. A section of the Tolai, called Mataungans, had sent squatters onto this land and had stated that they were going to occupy it and distribute it themselves and that they recognised no title and no law but their own will.

The Mataungans had made it clear that they would resist any attempt at removing their illegal squatters and had massed twelve to fifteen hundred persons on the site to resist by violence any attempted removal.

The persons gathered were armed with spears, bows and arrows, sling shots, rocks, bottles, bush knives and axes.

It was clear that if the police carried out their duty and removed those in illegal occupation of the land there was a strong risk of a major clash, of riot and of extreme violence.

After considering these reports, and bearing in mind the expressed wish of the Administrator's Executive Council and of the Tolai opposed to the Mataungans, that the law should be enforced, Cabinet decided that it was essential that law and order should be maintained in the Territory.

Cabinet decided that the Government fully agreed with the Administrator and would fully support the Administrator in carrying out measures which the Administrator had advised the Government he felt to be necessary in the present circumstances, to remove squatters.

The Administrator has been so informed. It is hoped the leaders of the Mataungan section of the Tolais will not incite their followers to the violence they have threatened; but if they do so the responsibility for any consequence will rest upon them alone.

CANBERRA  
19 July 1970