

MEDIA RELEASE

INDEPENDENCE AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN MATTERS RELATING TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA, MR. BILL MORRISON.

The Minister Assisting the Foreign Minister in Papua New Guinea matters, Mr. Bill Morrison, said today that the Australian Government would co-operate closely in achieving Papua New Guinea's goal of independence. He was commenting on the resolution passed yesterday by the House of Assembly in Port Moresby affirming that P.N.G. would move to independence as soon as practicable after a constitution had been enacted.

He said pending the final decision of the House of Assembly to declare a date for independence for Papua New Guinea, the Australian Government will conduct its relations with the Government of Papua New Guinea as a Government of an independent nation to which Australia has certain special and inescapable obligations.

Mr. Morrison added, "What exists today in P.N.G. is a state of defacto independence".

Even in the areas where Australia reserves ultimate responsibility until independence, mainly Defence and Foreign Relations, Papua New Guinea is already exercising day to day control and determining its own policies. The Minister said that even before self government, Papua New Guinea had appointed a Minister for Foreign Relations and Defence.

The Minister said that with Australia's encouragement, Papua New Guinea had taken its place in the international community and established contacts as if it were an independent entity.

All this accords with the Australian Government's policy that the transition from self government to independence be smooth, in the same way that the granting of self government on December 1 of last year had largely been a formalisation of what already existed.

Mr. Morrison said that the question of the date of independence should be kept in perspective. He recalled the statement made by Mr. Somare in the House of Assembly on Monday, 8 July -

"We all know that independence will be coming fairly soon and really the question of the exact date is not all that important."

Mr. Morrison said that despite the present preoccupation with the date of independence, the real challenges facing the Government and people of Papua New Guinea concern economic and social development.

Among these challenges, which are being effectively handled by the P.N.G. Government, are rural development, which is at the heart of social justice in any nation at an early stage of development; the best use of available resources, both manpower and the natural resources with which Papua New Guinea is blessed. Employment opportunities must be found for the rapidly growing number of job-seekers in urban areas. The Papua New Guinea Government is also facing up to questions like the best utilisation of foreign aid, the formulation of a land policy and an investment policy.

Mr. Morrison said that it would be unfortunate if pre-occupations over the exact independence date were to consume energy and attention which, in the interest of the future of Papua New Guinea, must necessarily be directed to resolving the real challenges which have been expressed by the leaders of Papua New Guinea.

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