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NATIONAL BROADCAST AND PRESS CONFERENCE
ON DARWIN DISASTER, SYDNEY, 30 DECEMBER 1974

PRIME MINISTER:will have the responsibility for looking after the people of Darwin, most of whom, of course, have been now evacuated from the city. And the Minister for the Northern Territory, Dr. Rex Patterson, will have prime responsibility for the reconstruction of the city. As you know, it had already been decided that there should be a payment of special benefits to families which were evacuated from Darwin for the two weeks after they left, that there should be free accommodation in hostels for those few weeks. We have now decided that the special benefits, \$31.00 per week and \$5.50 per child will also be paid for the first two weeks, also free of means test for the wives and children who have remained in Darwin and we have also decided that special benefits will be paid for women who have been evacuated for Darwin after the first two weeks for a further month. Mr. Hayden will be responsible for the general question of the movement, and the return of the evacuees and former residents. As you know the Government has undertaken the expense of evacuation and will undertake the expense for return. And Mr. Hayden will look after the welfare of the evacuees and the former citizens while they are still away from Darwin.

To deal with the reconstruction of the city, it's been essential to create some new structure. The existing Departments and instrumentalities, both those which are Federal Departments and instrumentalities and those which were set up in the Territory itself, are obviously unable to cope with the new situation, the most serious natural disaster ever to strick Australia. We have decided to establish a Darwin Reconstruction Commission, It will be composed of representatives of the Department of the Northern Territory, of Urban and Regional Development and Housing and Construction, of nominees of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and the Darwin City Council and there will be a Chairman, I'm very happy and proud to announce that Sir Leslie Thiess has accepted the Chairmanship of the Commission. It will be established by Statute as soon as the Parliament reassembles on the 11 February. We would hope for the co-operation of both sides of

in seeing that the legislation is passed promptly. It will be essential that the legislation take effect early, so that plans and performance can go ahead for the new city without any delay at all. We are appointing the members of the Commission as an interim commission forthwith. Dr. Patterson is in touch this afternoon with both the Legislative Assembly and the City Council asking them to appoint their nominees the Ministers concerned, Dr. Patterson himself, Mr. Uren, Mr. Johnson, are appointing the nominees of their Departments forthwith. and Sir Leslie Thiess has accepted as I have mentioned to you, the appointment. He is one of Australia's great achievers. You remember when a quarter of a century ago the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority was established, the only people who were able to fulfill the contracts which the Authority was letting were overseas companies, Americans, British, French, Norweigen, and consortions of such companies. And at last Sir Leslie Thiess, in that world-wide competition secured contracts and carried out some of the largest of the operations on the Snowy. He has, of course, been a pioneer, in the North, in very many areas, discovering, developing the natural resources of our country. He's harness skilled from all around the world, he has lead consortions of Australian as well as overseas companied in that respect. I believe that there is no man in Australia who would be better fitted to bring together the whole strain of Departmental and representative people who will be involved in reconstructing this city, planning and achieving this new gateway to Australia. And he is a very great man in the engineering and the management field and a man who has the respect of everybody in Australia and particularly in the North. He's done very many great things in his life. This will be one of the greatest.

Now until the Act is passed. early next month, the interim Commission can be advisory only, but nevertheless, we expect that all the bodies concerned, the National and the Territories instrumentalities and Departments will co-operated with getting the plans underway very quickly indeed.

It will be necessary of course to have regard to the whole use of the land in the Darwin metropolitan area. The Commission will have in its Charter the best use that can be made of the land of the public buildings, which in general are still standing, in sound condition, and also the type of new domestic construction which is required. It's too glib to say, as some people have, that the houses in Darwin were gerry-built. They were no more gerry-built than the houses in any other Australian capital. Unfortunately however they were not appropriate to a cyclonic coast and so therefore we rely on the experience of many authorities as the CSIRO building research unit, there is the faculty of engineering in the James Cook University, and there are many professional organisations which have offered their services in planning the new Darwin, to see that it is a place where people can go back and resume their lives with confidence.

The Commission, the Reconstruction Commission, the Darwin Reconstruction Commission, we expect will be established for a period of five years. We want to give confidence to people who have lived in Darwin and to those who are minded to work and live there, that this job will be seen through to completion, but we also want to give confidence that we expect the job will be able to be fully and satisfactorily and soundly achieved within a reasonable space of time.

There has been a very great deal of public support for various appeals. The Australian Government will naturally accept its proper responsibility in rehabilitation of the families and reconstruction of the structures. Fortunately most of them were insured. They were covered by normal insurance policies, by contrast with the situation at the time of the Brisbane floods, when most of the private structures were not covered by insurance. There have been a very great number of contributions, Lord Mayors, Premiers appeals and the whole range of charitable, voluntary organisations in Australia.

I should imagine that there has never been an appeal which has drawn support from so many regions in Australia as well as the whole gamut of voluntary organisation. To give the first instance which came to my notice between midday on Thursday and 11 p.m. on Friday, the citizens of Alice Springs, about 13,000 in number contributed \$105,000 in a radio appeal. If that is repeated throughout Australia then the people of Darwin will know directly and promptly the feelings that their fellow citizens throughout the nation have for their plight. The Minister for Northern Territory, Dr. Patterson has been asked to co-ordinate the various appeals. There are many foreign countries which have contributed, some European, large nations, some quite small African nations. Throughout our neighborhood, all the island states in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific have sent us messages.

Now the Cabinet was particularly wanting to place on record its appreciation of the Natural Disasters Organisation under Major-General Alan Stretton. He's a major-General, because his career hitherto has been in the Armed Forces, but he is Darwin in a civilian capacity. There is not martial law in Darwin, the whole of the organisation in that city has been on civilian lines but the authority is exercised by civilian police and all the citizens of Darwin who remain there have contributed towards the rehabilitation of families the reconstruction of the city. It's a great civilian effort. Now the Natural Disasters Organisation was only authorised last February. It came into operation on the 21 October. This is been its baptismal fire, and I believe that all Australians can be proud indeed of the way that this organisation under the Director-General, Major-General Stretton has responded. This disaster happened on Christmas Day in the most remote part of Australia and relief was under way in record time. Over 7,000 people were evacuated by air alone at the height of the evacuation exercise and we want to place on record the improvisation, the tireless efforts of the Armed Forces and of the airlines, Qantas, Ansett and TAA have never carried so many people in such difficult conditions. And many of you will have seen, as I did at Mascot, and at Adelaide, the way they were

received on arrival by Government Departments and by the whole range of volunteer organisations. So the Cabinet wanted to record its appreciation which we believe is shared by the whole Australian people, at the performance in extraordinarily remote difficult conditions of Australia's newly established Natural Disasters Organisation.

Are there any questions you wish to ask me about the Darwin situation?

QUESTION: Your visit to the airport yesterday was obviously well received. And provided comfort to the refugees who were there. In view of the fact don't you think that in time of distress your continued presence in Australia would be more appreciated by the refugees and Australians generally than a return to Europe?

PRIME MINISTER: No I do not. I've told you the Ministers who will have prime responsibility in these matters. I have commitments on behalf of the nation with seven governments in Europe and two in Asia. Obviously I should honour those commitments. The arrangements have now been made for Australia and the evacuees from Darwin by air have nearly all arrived now. They're in good hands.

QUESTION: Could not your Foreign Minister handle that work equally as well?

PRIME MINISTER: As I have said before there are many things that can only be done at the level of Head of Government, that is understood in every other country, it should be understood in Australia.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, are you aware that there has been some breakdown in the services and the handling of people when they have actually been arriving in places like Sydney, for instance, baggage has come in unlabeled, there's been a suffit of funds which has been operating, in fact overlapping one another, we've also had the situation of too many goods being demanded and accommodation probably knocked back by people who were originally

prepared to offer it. Do you think in the light of that there should be some sort of post mortem in the operation, not from Darwin where it seems to have been excellent, but in the capital cities themselves?

PRIME MINISTER: I believe your questions would give a completely wrong impression. I saw hundreds of people in Sydney, at Mascot yesterday, I saw many scores, some hundreds at Adelaide on Saturday night and my impression was that the people waiting for relatives and friends and the people who were arriving were very pleased indeed with the arrangements which had been made by the airlines, by the Departments and by the Civil Voluntary Organisations. It was a remarkably effective effort at co-ordination.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, Sir has it been determined yet whether Darwin will be built in situ or, making use of existing infra structure or will the town be built elsewhere. Will some of the northern suburbs be bulldozed as Dr. Patterson is reported to have suggested. Have any important decisions along these lines been decided yet?

PRIME MINISTER: In general terms Darwin will be reconstructed where it is. The particular places where installations or suburbs will be built or rebuilt will of course be left to the Darwin Reconstruction Commission. There is a very valuable infra structure in Darwin. The public buildings are basically quite sound, they can be restored quite promptly. It still has to be ascertained how many people will want to live in Darwin and also it has to be ascertained in what areas they can be most appropriately housed. So in general terms Darwin will be reconstructed where it is. After all it is a big port, it is a big airport and everywhere in the tropics people like to live on the coast. It's true that you don't get cyclones 100 kilometres from the coast, but people don't like the climate 100 kilometres from the coast. So Darwin, as a general area will be reconstructed. No question about that, but of course I wouldn't I specify which suburbs will be rebuilt or which new suburbs would be built. That will be decided, I would hope after proper consideration by this representative Reconstruction

Commission which we're establishing within the next couple of days in an interim form and which I hope will become a Statutory body in the middle of February.

QUESTION: Prime Minister, quite apart from the location of Darwin, will the decision on what kind of city Darwin will be in the future, be a matter for the Government or for this newly constituted authority?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it will be finally of course to the Government like all these decisions. but it will be on the advice, after investigation and report by the Darwin Reconstruction Commission.

QUESTION: Will any attempt be made to repopulate Darwin to the extent that it was prior to the cyclone, Does the Government regard the population of Darwin previously to have been adequate in excess, or what size.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, this is a matter for people themselves to decide. Nobody can be made to leave Darwin or to go to Darwin or to go back to Darwin, That is for people themselves to decide. One of the things I would imagine to be ascertained is how many of the people who have left Darwin want to go back. I found some yesterday quite determined to go back, they love the place. There are others who, somewhat fewer in number it seemed to me, who would not go back.

QUESTION: One of the persons who I talked to in Darwin who was sticking with his house, said that he didn't want to leave until such time as he was assured or had some information that the Government and his insurance company would help him rebuild it. The insurance companies, we were told in Darwin yesterday, have agreed that they're going to pay out on these claims on the normal claims, but have you had any information as to whether they are under strain in meeting the size of the claims that will be made from Darwin, the insurance companies that is?

PRIME MINISTER: I have no doubt whatever that the insurance company will honour the contracts which householders and

business people have with them. I would also expect that all the insurance companies would be in a financial position to meet the claims. After all within the last year the Government has passed legislation guaranteeing the soundness of insurance such as there has been for the last 30 years, guaranteeing the soundness of banks. So that nobody should be in any doubt that his insurance company will honour the claim. The Minister for Repatriation and Compensation. Senator Wheeldon is investigating the whole of this matter. It is of interest, of course, that in Darwin there were a very great number of people who were injured who under the law as it stands, including all the forms of compulsory insurance that there are in Australia for third-party insurance on the roads, or workers compensation insurance in shops and factories, all those people that in Darwin wouldn't have been covered that way, this was a natural disaster. Senator Wheeldon says you can't sue a cyclone, but under the legislation which he's introduced in the Senate it's gone through the House of Representatives already as you know, the National Compensation Bill, anybody who is injured in Darwin, for any cause whatever would be assured of a proper income as long as he remained injured. This is a very clear example of the necessity of having a National Compensation Scheme.

QUESTION; Did Cabinet receive an estimate of the total cost of Government assistance to Darwin.

PRIME MINISTER : No none whatever, there will two Bills brought before Parliament when it meets on the 11 February. One will be to establish this Darwin Reconstruction Commission. The other will be to make a special appropriation for all the expenses of one kind or another for the remainder of this financial year for Darwin. and some of these matters will be expenses for personal property, some will be for social service payments, as many of these payments are being made on more generous conditions that apply at the moment, without means tests, and so on. And all the matters which the Government will have to finance will be in that appropriation Bill and I would expect that within the four weeks the Cabinet we'll be having them, all those amounts will be quantified for the remainder of this

financial year. So there was not an estimate made today but arrangements were made for the estimates all to be in hand within four weeks. and there will be an appropriation Bill introduced to meet all those expenses.

QUESTION; Will the people of Darwin be allowed to go back and rebuild as soon as they feel they are able to, or will they need prior permission from the Reconstruction Authority?

PRIME MINISTER: The Reconstruction Commission will clearly have the responsibility where it is best to have houses, what sort of houses. It would be quite irresponsible to allow people to build houses of the type which didn't withstand the cyclone and it would be no comfort to some people to rebuild in areas which may be developed for other purposes. Clearly the whole question of the use of land is one of the things which will have to be scrutinised and determined much more carefully than in the past.

QUESTION; Will that include the timetable for the people to be allowed back into the area?

PRIME MINISTER: I'm only concerned with where the houses would be built. After all nobody can be prevented from going anywhere in Australia. Nobody can be compelled to go anywhere in Australia. There are at the moment, for the next week or so, some limitations on movement into Darwin because the airfield can't take all the movements required of it. Incidentally, I should have mentioned to you that Major-General Stretton and the Natural Disasters Organisation will hand over their responsibilities on Thursday. The Governor-General will be up there at that time I expect and the Department of the Northern Territory will resume its normal role in administering the city.

QUESTION; Are you aware that politics has entered into this situation with your Minister for the Media, Senator McClelland refusing to co-operate in helping TV commercial networks get film back to Sydney, because quote " They opposed his change of Media control in the Senate "

PRIME MINISTER: I don't believe this. I brought some films back yesterday, the previous night, on Saturday night, for various commercial things and Senator McClelland was up there, and so also was the Head of his Department and the head of the ABC. I don't appreciate aspersions being made about my Ministers like this. I have no reason to believe the allegation you make has any foundation whatever.

QUESTION: Does the answer to the question before the last, about the appropriation this year, mean the the Government intends to finance the rehabilitation of Darwin without cutting back other programmes?

PRIME MINISTER: At this stage welfare payments, I wouldn't think there's any justification for cutting back on expenditure. After all no expenditures were cut back on the Queensland floods. There may later clearly have to be some postponement of other structural expenditure, for instance there's a limited number of town planners available and one then has to determine the priority for their services. But the immediate matters, the matters which I was stating would be in the Appropriation Bill introduced on 11 February are of the welfare character. Now just because you have to make unexpected payments to people who have to be evacuated from Darwin or who are homeless in Darwin, is no excuse clearly for reducing welfare payments for which Parliament has already made provision.

QUESTION: Mr. Prime Minister, at a different political level from the one raised earlier, to what extent do the Government's plans to reconstruct Darwin and rehabilitate its citizens depend upon the acquiescence of the Opposition on matters such as Senator Wheeldon's Compensation Bill, the establishment of authorities etc.? Have you been in touch with Mr. Snedden and Senator Withers for instance? Have they indicated that they are quite willing to go ahead with...

PRIME MINISTER: I don't believe that either have expressed a view about the National Compensation Bill. I won't assume they';; oppose it. It's been referred unanimously by the

Senate to a Senate Committee . I think the arguments for the National Compensation Bill are overwhelming, not the least of the arguments is the fact that so many people as the law stands now , everywhere in Australia have no compensation at all for injuries which they suffer in events such as this. Now if the Bill was already in then people would be entitled to this compensation forethwith, you wouldn't have to make any special provision whatever.

QUESTION: Surely it's going to take some time for the Darwin Reconstruction Commission to get down to the nitty-gritty of actually building houses. What temporary arrangements are you making for accommodation for the people who want to stay in Darwin?

PRIME MINISTER: There are some buildingsthere such as motels which can be fairly quickly habitable. But I would think that this Commission will produce results as quickly as is possible to do so. There are a great number of people who have to contribute to its deliberations and Sir Leslie Thiess will get them working together quickly and effectively.
