



## PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE AT RICHMOND RAAF BASE - 04/02/86

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, there were a lot of concerns about the conditions of these planes. You expressed some yourself before you finally agreed that this would go ahead. I assume that now those concerns are over you are happy with the state of the plane and the condition of it?

PM: Well, obviously it is more important that those who have an expert knowledge be happy about this and I am assured that they are and I accept their indications. It has taken more time and it has been somewhat more expensive than we were originally led to believe. I think some 4,000 plus hours have been involved, as I am told, in refurbishing this plane and getting it ready for its operations. And again I pay tribute to the Air Force, our great Royal Australian Air Force for the work they have done as well as the other people that have been involved. Yes, I am told that it is right because we have to remember that the conditions there under which they will be operating are very, very difficult. There is further work to be done in Bordeaux in France in regard to heavy air frame work but from what they tell me, they are confident that it is going to pass those tests there in Bordeaux.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, what is the extent of the Government's generosity on this occasion? How much has it cost?

PM: Well, the estimate for the refurbishing of this aircraft, the one aircraft, is about \$1.5 million which is beyond what we were lead to believe originally. It was thought that we might be able to do two for about that price. But at the same time the level of demand and need in Ethiopia is declining somewhat, so we will review the operation of this aircraft and just see how it goes. But the important thing is that this great aircraft is in good shape to do the important job it will be doing on behalf of all of Australia.

JOURNALIST: And what about the operating costs? There was some talk a while ago that Mr Geldof was a little disappointed that we weren't helping foot that bill?

PM: Well, no, we made it quite clear what we were doing and the operating costs can be met in a variety of ways. I note that they are looking at a variety of sources of funds. They will be met.

JOURNALIST: Can you give any guarantee if there will be a second plane?

PM: Well there is not a question of a guarantee at this point. We will examine how this one operates and we'll be guided by the indication of the needs that exist. Let me say that I am informed that the level of monthly distribution in tonnage is estimated to be dropping from 10,000 tonnes per month, I believe, to about 5,000 tonnes per month in March and it may be down to about 2,500 tonnes per month in May. There has been a significant and unforeseen improvement, so the level of demand may not be as great as when we were first talking about this.

JOURNALIST: Who will be guiding you on that - the Red Cross?

PM: Yes. They are the people with whom we are specifically dealing?

JOURNALIST: Does the extra cost in refurbishing this plane make the Government a bit more reluctant to do another?

PM: Well, it coincides, as I say, with a reduction in the level of tonnages which need to be distributed because there has been a number of things happening. There has been an opening up of the road system in Ethiopia beyond what had previously been anticipated. And with that and other changes that have occurred, the level of need is not as high as it was. So we will look at it now .....

JOURNALIST: When will you make that decision?

PM: Well, we will be informed by those who are operating there constantly on how it is going. That information will be fed through to us from now on. But all I am saying is on the material that I have read just recently, it raises the question of whether the level of need for aircraft will be as high as when we first made the decision to make two available.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, you spoke about a review of this aircraft. When would that be likely to come?

PM: I am really talking about a review of the need generally. Obviously we will have reports as to how this aircraft is going. But that was not put in terms of saying its operation is in a conditional state. It is not. We are now ready to go and there is a job to be done. The only question is whether into the future the level of need that was put before where two were talked about is going to be the case.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, given the decision that the Government has finally made to supply this aircraft for the Red Cross, have you set a precedent now where you may, shall we say, be requested for further supplies of similar material in the future?

PM: I don't know about precedents. We were confronted, the people of Australia were confronted with a extraordinary situation of vast human need there and clearly it was appropriate

to make a response which was within our capacities. Now, I don't talk about precedents in these sorts of situations. We look at need as it arises. As I say, it is not only externally, in this country at the moment we have a disaster which has hit us with Cyclone Winifred and it's pleasing that in those circumstances, some of the same sorts of resources are immediately available to assist need in this country. I repeat the services that are provided by our armed forces, the Air Force, the Army and Navy are often overlooked in what they do in Australia. So I think it's a matter of pride to us all that as well as having very efficient armed services in this country which carry out their primary responsibility, they are also there to be called upon in circumstances like this and within Australia.

JOURNALIST: Right, Mr Hawke, just the fact there is a shortfall of airlift capability in the Air Force and the fact that these things have been sitting unsold for 7-8 years. Would there be any thought to in fact keeping them in Australia for this sort of work?

PM: Well, the decision about the overall disposal or retention of aircraft is a matter for the Defence Forces themselves. I am not here to make an off-the-cuff decision in the light of the provision of this aircraft as to what the decisions of our armed forces will be about their equipment. Our main thought in Government since we have been in is to ensure that the equipment needs of armed services, including the Air Force, are met. The major concentration of our significant and steady increase in the real levels of expenditure for the armed services has been centred upon equipment. We want to make their equipment as relevant and modern as we possibly can. As that is done, obviously there will be other equipment which becomes obsolescent. Now, how that is disposed of is obviously a matter primarily of decision for the forces concerned.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, about the university in Sydney's west. Do you have any view either way on whether or not there should be one here? There is a recommendation.

PM: Well, that is something that is being looked at.

JOURNALIST: Can I just ask you what the latest is as far as ..... is concerned?

PM: Yes, I asked the Minister for Primary Industry, Mr Kerin, to go up there immediately. He did that yesterday, went up there early morning and I am now awaiting a report from Mr Kerin and, of course, we have indicated, and I asked him to indicate that the processes of emergency relief will be put in train. We will be awaiting a report from the appropriate sources including a report from the Queensland State Government. The normal resources of the disaster relief, emergency relief will be made available.

JOURNALIST: Members from the Caucus Economic Committee have made comments about what might happen with the falling oil prices. What do you predict at this stage?

PM: Well, I am glad to notice Mr Brown, in his statement and in his subsequent statements on the radio can be expressed, as he should do, his complete confidence in the Government's handling of this matter. We will be, as we have made it clear, considering a submission on this matter in the relatively near future and we will be making those decisions which are necessary for the continuation of the sound economic policies which we have provided for this country in the three years we have been in Government. We have done the job, if I might say so, admirably to this point. We are going to continue to do it.

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