



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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Australians have watched with close interest and deep concern the recent events in Fiji. The Australian Government has monitored the evolving situation extremely carefully, hour by hour, including through the reporting of our High Commission in Suva. It is absolutely appropriate that this should be so given the importance to Australian interests of stability in this near neighbour and the fact that we have been faced with the unprecedented spectacle in the South Pacific of the forced overthrow by the military of a democratically elected government.

Cabinet met again today to review the very fluid situation in Fiji, to review the approach which the Government has adopted and to consider a range of possible responses by Australia.

I express again our continuing strong concern at damage being inflicted on the fabric of Fiji society and on its political institutions.

Australia is accustomed to share with Fiji common values of the rule of law and of Parliamentary democracy based on free elections. Those values have been shared because of our respective sovereign commitments to them and in recognition of their contribution to the welfare, progress, and security of the South Pacific region.

The Government accordingly believes that in emphasising publicly those values and objectives it has also been helping in a time of crisis to hold before the leadership of Fiji the values of that nation as well as of Australia. The Government continues to be convinced of the sole claim to legitimacy of the Bavadra Government. It will maintain its condemnation of the military coup. It reaffirms also its strong view that if reliance is to be placed on fresh elections they must be free and general and be held under the existing Constitution.

Although the situation in Fiji is highly complex and although there have been many twists and turns as the situation has unfolded, no analysis can escape one basic judgement. The essence of the crisis is the assault on Fijian democracy. The solution to the crisis must be the restoration of democratic principles and practice. We can be flexible as to precise solutions, but consistency with that basic principle is vital.

We believe also that given the delicately balanced communal relationships in Fiji, the protection and preservation into the future of democratic process is indispensable to all the people of Fiji. The unique composition of Fiji society provides added proof of the essentiality of genuine democracy to all groups.

Fiji already has certain constitutionally entrenched rights for the Fijians. The maintenance or modification of these rights are the responsibility of all those in Fiji. They will fail themselves if they fail to proceed by due democratic processes and if they confuse the agreed entrenchment of certain rights with any attempt by one community to seek control of the other through some contamination of the Constitution.

The Government confirms its support for the Governor-General's courageous efforts to uphold the Constitution and to accept appropriate advice to that end. It praises the courage displayed by Dr Bavadra under enormous strain and his conciliatory approach following his release. It appeals to both major communities to recognise as they have in the past that they each depend vitally on Parliamentary democracy. It reaffirms that the armed forces and police have only one role - to serve and not subvert their democratic Constitution.

We hope earnestly that the search for a solution and the proper means to finding it can proceed with the participation of all parties and at a pace as well as direction that will prevent any further disturbance of law and order or further human suffering and damage to property.

In weighing our responses to developments in Fiji we need also to take account of the views of our friends in the South Pacific region. The events in Fiji are as unwelcome for them as they are for us, and unsettling for Fiji's neighbours. In deciding on our own actions we have to bear in mind the implications they have for these countries and for our relations with them.

We shall keep in contact with these countries about developments in Fiji and our responses. I have myself been in touch with New Zealand Prime Minister Lange on a number of occasions and have spoken to Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Wingti. Our diplomatic missions in the region are conveying our views to the Governments of other South Pacific countries and are reporting their views to us.

I will have an excellent and very timely opportunity to talk about events in Fiji with South Pacific leaders at the South Pacific Forum meeting in Apia in just over a week.

A most important consideration is that in influencing the course of events in Fiji the sense of direction conveyed by the collective views of Fiji's neighbours will be of great importance. Those deciding how to resolve the crisis in Fiji will have to be conscious of the importance to Fiji of its reputation in the South Pacific region and of its ties with neighbouring countries.

For this reason, also, I attach considerable weight to maintaining close consultation and co-operation with our neighbours in the South Pacific.

Clearly the development of exact means of restoring democratic processes in Fiji must be principally a matter for the people of Fiji themselves. But Australia can, by its own posture and actions, help facilitate the process and impress the need for the effort in Fiji to proceed with speed and determination. Because of our own national interest and our longstanding friendship with Fiji and its people we cannot ignore a responsibility to do so.

In the light of these considerations Cabinet discussed a number of options. It noted that I have already suggested to Commonwealth Secretary-General Ramphal that he issue a statement in support of maintaining the democratic process in Fiji under the existing constitution. I appreciate his prompt response.

Other specific actions already taken by the Government in response to last week's coup have been

- . a freeze on the initiation of any new Australian aid activities
- . suspension of a range of activities in the defence co-operation field, involving:-
 - no new defence co-operation activities
 - suspension of all routine RAN visits and RAAF flights
 - suspension of plans for future activities with, and delivery of new equipment to, the Fiji armed forces
 - no acceptance of further Fiji Armed Forces personnel for training in Australia
 - on the day of the coup instructions were given to Australian advisory personnel in Fiji to continue to report for duty but to avoid action that would be seen as outside their status as Australian Defence Co-operation personnel.

In addition Cabinet has today decided on a number of important new steps:

- . The bilateral officials talks with Fiji scheduled for June have been cancelled.
- . We will intensify dialogue with other countries about the situation in Fiji. One purpose will be to encourage other Governments to make absolutely clear their opposition to the Fiji coup and their demand for the full restoration of democracy there
 - a special effort will be made to talk with other Commonwealth countries.
- . In addition, it has been decided that Australia should seek an exchange of views on the Fiji crisis with our fellow members of the South Pacific Forum. Those soundings have already begun as part of our continuing dialogue
 - however, the South Pacific Forum Meeting in Apia at the end of the month will provide a valuable opportunity for leaders of the regional countries directly concerned to consider what scope there might be for us together to signal our support for the restoration of democracy in Fiji.
- . And, in the defence co-operation area, Australian Defence Force Advisory personnel now serving in Fiji have been instructed not to report for duty and
 - training of Fiji military personnel at present in Australia has been suspended.

Cabinet examined a number of possible economic measures - including aid - which could serve to bring home the depth of Australia's concern to the authorities in Fiji. It concluded that the measures reviewed should remain on the table, but that this was not the time for quick recourse to economic pressures. The immediate and spontaneous effects on Fiji's economy of the attack on constitutional rule were in any case severe and may well intensify unless normality is rapidly restored. These heavy economic penalties on Fiji will be difficult to retrieve and are likely, if left unchecked, to damage permanently the existing base for the economic welfare of all Fiji citizens. Cabinet took the view that all responsible figures in Fiji should be acutely aware of this prospect in considering the future course of events in their country.

PROTECTION OF AUSTRALIANS

The Cabinet today also agreed details of contingency planning to evacuate Australian citizens from Fiji should this be required.

As I have repeatedly made clear, my Government unequivocally rejects any suggestion that it would intervene with military force to influence the political processes now underway in Fiji. Australian contingency planning only addresses the possible need to protect the safety of Australian citizens in Fiji should civil order there deteriorate.

The Government's absolute priority in this situation, as in all circumstances, is to preserve the safety and welfare of Australian citizens.

It is the Government's strongest hope that emergency evacuation measures would not be required. The Government is conscious of the measures being undertaken to reduce tensions in the country and that at the present time the situation is relatively calm. However, the Government is also conscious that acts of violence have occurred and that there is a potential risk to Australian citizens in Fiji.

Circumstances at the moment do not require the evacuation of Australian citizens, and the Government has no information to indicate that expatriates in Fiji, including Australians, are in any immediate danger.

The Government nevertheless considers that prudent responsibility to its citizens requires it to make provision for the possible evacuation of Australians from Fiji.

To achieve this, it is expected that the operations of international airlines serving Fiji should be able to meet the needs of those Australian citizens who might wish to leave. The Government is keeping in close contact with Qantas on arrangements for this.

However, the Government must also take account of the possibility that civil operations may need to be supplemented by other means, including assistance by elements of the Australian Defence Force. On the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force, the Government has examined a range of planning options to meet a variety of possible scenarios. These include the use of:

- . civil aircraft
- . a combination of civil and military aircraft
- . military aircraft only, and
- . naval ships.

Cabinet noted that because of pre-programmed visits to the South Pacific there were already five RAN ships in the immediate vicinity of Fiji (HMAS Sydney, Adelaide, Stalwart, Wollongong and Cessnock). The Government has decided those ships will remain in the area for the time being. In addition, HMAS Success, the Fleet Underway Replenishment Ship has sailed for the Fiji area today (21 May) to support the continued operation of the RAN ships already in the area.

Cabinet also noted that HMAS Tobruk left Sydney today en route to Apia, Western Samoa, to provide accommodation and other support for the South Pacific Forum Meeting on 29, 30 May. Advantage may be taken of this deployment to have additional support available for the possible movement of Australian citizens from Fiji.

Because of the large number of Australians in Fiji and the potential complexity of any evacuation, should it be required, some additional personnel may be embarked in HMAS Tobruk for transfer to the other ships in the Fiji area where they would remain unless required. The personnel, consisting of an army company (about 110 personnel) from the Operational Deployment Force based in Townsville, have been placed on notice and may be flown to Norfolk Island to join HMAS Tobruk if required.

I wish to stress that the only purpose in embarking the company would be to assist in any evacuation operation, including assistance with the security of Australian citizens and the provision of administrative and communications support for that operation. This would be the minimum number of personnel for such a task and would be totally inadequate for any broader purpose.

I have released these details so that there will be no misunderstanding of the purpose of the Australian Defence Force units near Fiji. I emphasise that there is no current intention to evacuate Australians from Fiji and that this is simply prudent contingency planning. Should circumstances arise where evacuation becomes necessary this would be announced by the Government and arranged through the Australian High Commission.

The Government will maintain its present close contacts with other countries which have similar interests in the situation about possible cooperative efforts in the event that evacuation becomes necessary.