



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF NEWS CONFERENCE, HOTEL ROSSI, VANUATU
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JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, does the communique mean that the weapons from West Germany should not be destroyed at Johnston Atoll?

PM: What it means is that the Forum has expressed a concern about that issue. If you turn to the paragraph, it's about paragraph 28 as I recall. Yes 28. It says 'While noting the stringent precautions being taken by the United States, the Forum remained concerned by the substantial potential risk to the environment and peoples of the Pacific of the whole operation, including, in particular, shipments of chemical weapons stockpiles from the Federal Republic of Germany'. So they've expressed a concern.

JOURNALIST: Both Mr Palmer and Mr Namaliu have ... that the Forum will oppose the transport of weapons for destruction. ...

PM: Well the Forum understands that there is nothing that can be done by the Forum about that issue. There was considerable discussion on the issue. There's no doubt, absolutely no doubt, some members of the Forum would clearly prefer that that not happen. There was no consensus on that point. The communique goes as far as there was consensus.

JOURNALIST: Was it a humdinger of a debate as Geoffrey Palmer said?

PM: Well it may be a humdinger by New Zealand standards. By the standards of the Australian Labor Party it was pretty tame.

JOURNALIST: ... Does it mean that the weapons shipments will go ahead?

PM: Let's just get the framework right. The Forum was never going to be able to determine what was going to happen. The best that the Forum can do on this issue was to express its point of view. As I say, the communique of the Forum goes as far as there was consensus and I obviously acknowledge, as I would've before the Forum, that there were points of view which go beyond the consensus contained in the communique.

JOURNALIST: Why do you think you failed to convince the Forum ... communicate ...?

PM: Why did I fail to get the Forum -

JOURNALIST: Persuade. Why were you unable to -

PM: Unable to persuade them to adopt a communique to stop -

JOURNALIST: The shipment of weapons.

PM: Because I never set out to do that. So how can I fail in something I didn't set out to do. I mean I accept as a politician that I can be accused of failure if I try to do something and I don't achieve it. I don't accept that it's a reasonable proposition that I failed in something I didn't set out to do.

JOURNALIST: (inaudible)

PM: No but you heard what she was saying. It was the other way around. What I am putting is that I put to the Forum my view and the consensus of the Forum has not put an opposite to my point of view. I mean it hasn't said this shouldn't happen. It has expressed its concern. I think that's the appropriate consensus to have. I mean if you've got a range of opinions there from one which says they - at one point some of them didn't want any action at all on Johnston Atoll. You've got some for that point of view to mine where I think on balance it is for disarmament reasons best that the FRG stock goes there for destruction. Now those positions remain. I hold mine and we have a consensus which goes as far as is possible and that is to express the concern that people have about the potential risk. I am perfectly relaxed about that outcome. It seems to me directly in line with the best that I could've hoped to achieve.

JOURNALIST: So you weren't rebuffed?

PM: Look, this is infantile. I mean, with respect, it's infantile. I was neither rebuffed, nor was the absolute Australian position endorsed, which I never had any expectation it would be. The important thing that has happened out of the discussion is that the Forum has expressed the view that there should be the destruction of chemical weapons.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, -

PM: Wait a minute, let me finish. That they have expressed the view that there should be the destruction of chemical weapons and they have expressed their concerns about the possible dangers. Certainly the view is quite clear, which is Australia's view as well, that the absolute limit of what should be done at Johnston Atoll is the three categories. That is those 1800 tonnes of weapons which are on Johnston Atoll, other stocks which may be elsewhere in the Pacific, and the stocks

from the Federal Republic of Germany. And beyond that there should be no more activities there and as far as the balance of United States stocks are concerned, they should be destroyed at replica plants on the mainland United States which is the intention of the United States.

JOURNALIST: ... said previously by Mr Palmer and Mr Namilau, have left the clear impression that the Forum sent a message, definite message to the United States ... shipments of those stocks from the FRG ... Johnston Atoll. ...

PM: I repeat, I would've thought that this is not a complex issue. I mean that what I've said in terms of what's here in the communique makes it quite clear. Let me, as it does not seem to have been understood, go to what the wording of the communique is on this issue. 'While noting the stringent precautions being taken by the United States, the Forum remained concerned by the substantial potential risk to the environment and peoples of the Pacific of the whole operation, including, in particular, shipments of chemical weapons stockpiles from the Federal Republic of Germany'. They expressed concern about the whole ..., particularly the shipments of chemical weapons stockpile from the Federal Republic of Germany. But they understand that the weapons have to be destroyed and in regard to those that are there on the atoll I think there was almost unanimous agreement that they should be destroyed there. So there's an expression of concern. But there it is.

JOURNALIST: ... your reading of that communique, the Forum is not sending a message to the United States that they should not send those weapons?

PM: That would be the preference of some members of the Forum. That would be the preference. I don't want to be rude to you but how many times do I have to make the point, and I'll make it again, and I would hope that it gets through to you. Because it's not a complex point. It's a very simple point. This is a consensus document. So a consensus document by definition, if you understand the word consensus, goes as far as expressing a view held by all. And that's what it does. So it doesn't go as far as to say the Forum is saying that all members are agreed that shipments should not come from the Federal Republic of Germany. Because there was no such consensus. It expresses a concern about potential problems. Ok, I'm quite relaxed about that. But you could not have a consensus document which said all members of the Forum were saying that shipment shouldn't come from the Federal Republic of Germany. Now I repeat, that is essentially a very simple proposition which is reflected in the communique.

JOURNALIST: I think I'm across that simple proposition. ... Rabbie Namilau's across it because -

PM: Well you would have to ask Mr - I mean I'm not here to answer for Mr Palmer, nor am I here to answer for Mr Namilau. I'm here to answer for Australia, which I'm doing.

JOURNALIST: But Mr Namilau's the Forum chairman and -

PM: No he was not the Forum chairman. I mean if you don't know that by this -

JOURNALIST: Forum spokesman, and he has presented that view to us here tonight.

VAUGHAN: (inaudible)

PM: The gentleman here is saying that's not so. That he read the communique to you.

JOURNALIST: Well he did but he also ...

PM: Well if he read the communique to you it's quite clear. And I would've assumed that he would do that and the communique is in terms that I've put it and with the limitations that I put. And however much, and I know that you don't want to come all this way without the possibility of a story, but go beat, beat beat, beat-up, you will not change in any way, if you're going to be accurate, the reality of what I've put to you. Because I'm not making up something. I'm telling you what's there, I'm telling you factually, I'm telling you what a consensus is and I'm telling you how far that consensus communique has been able to go in expressing the view of the Forum as a whole.

JOURNALIST: How do you expect the United States to respond to the concerns?

PM: I don't know. I hope they will take it seriously. Clearly what I want to happen is that we will in this twenty-one month period take the opportunity to a) have reported to us what's happening, b) I would hope that scientists from the Forum would actually go there and have the opportunity of seeing what's happening and c) and most importantly, we will certainly be conveying to the United States those questions that have been raised in the report which we have circulated to all Forum members. They have the complete reports that were available to me and you will see that there were certain questions raised there. We will raise them with the United States and I hope they'll be taken into account.

JOURNALIST: Was Australia the only country to stand in the way of the resolution which might have condemned the transportation of weapons ...?

PM: No.

JOURNALIST: (inaudible)

PM: I'm not going to what happened in terms of individual positions within the Forum. I answered that question but I don't go to disclose positions of particular Forum countries. I mean if you want to try and find that out you do, but I'm not going to it.

JOURNALIST: You acknowledge that some of the countries did obviously want the final ... to go as far as ... How hard did you have to argue with them not to ...?

PM: I didn't - let me see. How hard did I have to go? Not as hard as I've had to go on some issues in my political career. I expressed the view, as I always do, did it generously, articulately and with a compassionate view of alternative positions.

JOURNALIST: What's happened to the scientific mission that you proposed yesterday and today I understand?

PM: I would think that what is likely to happen - and let me make this point. The other members of the Forum made the point that they haven't got the scientific personnel to participate on a scientific basis in such a mission. But I would think it would make sense, and it's perfectly compatible with paragraph 29 - 'The Forum therefore called for early discussions with the United States on all aspects of the JACADS operations, including the shipment of stockpiles from FRG.' That it's consistent with that that we should send some scientists there. And as I said in the discussion, despite the fact that our fellow members of the Forum may not have the scientific qualified personnel, I still think it would be sensible for some of them to go with our scientists. Because it wouldn't be satisfactory, I think, in the circumstances just to have Australians and New Zealanders there. I think we should have some other people with us so that they can have the opportunity of asking questions and being informed.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, you said earlier on that you didn't want to come to the Forum telling the Pacific nations what to ... There's obviously been a very long debate this afternoon. Were you forced into the position though of trying to direct them where they didn't want to go?

PM: No, of course not. I mean I would've thought that you would've understood from my statements of yesterday that I'm very conscious of the position of Australia. We have a responsibility to put our knowledge and our position before the Forum. It would be an insult to our fellow members of the Forum if we didn't share with them the knowledge that we have and the positions that we adopt on the basis of the knowledge we have. Now having done that, having put your positions, you don't stand there and say now look, Big Brother has spoken, that's the position that you must adopt. You do your best to try and persuade and there is no doubt that as a result of the position that I've put there is a reflection of the Australian position within the communique.

JOURNALIST: What do you think motivated some of the small island states to oppose this proposal so vigorously?

PM: I have no doubt what motivated them to do it. If you hear of a proposition which is involving the destruction of chemical weapons and there are suggestions made by people, as there have been - without being exhaustive about it, and without being condemnatory of them. But Greenpeace for instance have expressed concerns and those concerns that have been expressed have raised apprehension in the minds of these people. That's perfectly natural. It's what one would expect. I certainly think they wouldn't have been doing their duty in this Forum if they hadn't raised those concerns. There's nothing esoteric about why they would express those concerns. I would be surprised if they hadn't.

JOURNALIST: Do you accept the line from Mr Palmer where he said that Forum nations are very concerned that sending the stockpiles from Germany could create a dangerous precedent for other countries to use the Pacific as a dumping ground? ...

PM: I think that that will not happen. I think the Forum was correct to express the general point of view, which they do, that we don't want the Pacific to be regarded by metropolitan powers as a convenient dumping ground either for hazardous waste or the testing of weapons, that it shouldn't be thought of in those terms. But in regard to Johnston Atoll, I remind you that the position there is that there are the three categories. We'll be certainly, from Australia's point of view as well as the Forum, making it quite clear that we expect the United States to adhere to what they've said. That is that there will only be the 1800 tonnes on Johnston Atoll, any others found in the Pacific and the FRG and that there will be a firm and complete expectation that the rest of the United States stocks of chemical weapons shall be destroyed in the mainland United States in the eight plants, in the eight populated areas of the United States where those plants are planned to be built. Now if that's done, and I expect without question that it should be done and will be done, then I don't see that there's any precedent for any other countries to say well we'll come and try and do this in the Pacific. And what you've got to remember is that they would have to have a place, any other power would have to have a place in the Pacific where they could do it. That, as far as I know, wouldn't be available to them.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, are you aware that the US Congress has passed an amendment requiring a feasibility study to look at transporting chemical weapons from the sites where they are ... and do you think one can still have confidence in Senator Cheney's assurance that they will not be moved to Johnston Atoll?

PM: Yes.

JOURNALIST: Mr Hawke, on another issue -

JOURNALIST: Are you aware of the amendment?

PM: Just a minute, just a minute. I'll come back to you. Don't feel that you're going to be ignored.

JOURNALIST: Did you meet with Ratu Mara this afternoon and, if you did, how did the discussions go and what did you cover?

PM: Answer, yes, I did meet with Ratu Mara for a period, I think, of about 40 minutes during the break. The discussion was conducted amicably. I can't go to everything that was discussed, but clearly the issues were essentially what has happened and likely developments within Fiji and the Fiji-Australia relationship. That was the generic area of the discussions. I conveyed to the Fijian Prime Minister the concerns Australia has about the developments and made that clear, but didn't, you know, go on and on and on at great length - made the point. I was concerned essentially now to talk about the future and I believe that despite the flaws that have been referred to, that the situation is that the Constitution will now provide an opportunity for Fiji to return to a form of representative government and there is no doubt that in that sense the new Constitution will provide at least a firmer basis for government than the interim arrangements which have been in place since the coups of 1987. I think one must say that regrettably, but realistically, there appears to be no likelihood that a significantly different Constitution would be agreed upon in Fiji at the moment. Now that seems to be a realistic assessment of the situation. Now, obviously, I make the judgement that it is a matter for the coalition interests to make their own decision as to whether they are going to participate in the processes under the new Constitution. That's their decision and no-one else's decision. But I expressed the view and I have the view that it, there would be, I think, value in their reconsidering their initial statement that they're not going to participate, that they're going to boycott the processes. It seems to me that it's important that all groups in Fiji should stay engaged in the parliamentary processes and, for as far as it's possible in that way, for the multi-racial traditions of Fiji to be kept alive. Now clearly, as far as the future is concerned, how the relations between Fiji and Australia will develop will depend, amongst other things, upon how the system of government develops under the new Constitution and, may I say, particularly including the extent of military influence. So these were the range of issues and the basis upon which I conducted the discussion with the Prime Minister of Fiji.

JOURNALIST: ... boycott, do you believe that this Constitution is broadly acceptable to the majority of Fijians?

PM: Well, there's obviously a significant proportion of the Fijian population that don't accept it. I mean, the interim government would acknowledge that, but having said that and we have referred to what are perceived as inadequacies, you've got to now ask yourself, is there any, is there any possibility, any realistic possibility, of there being a different Constitution adopted and if the judgement is made that there is not, then it seems to us that what needs to happen is to try and get the system of representative and parliamentary government going again, even from the point of view, those who would prefer to see what they regard as a better and more representative Constitution, to try and get this going and on that basis, see if subsequently there may be the basis of change. I'm sorry, now someone was saying I haven't answered a question.

JOURNALIST: ... question was whether you were aware that the US Congress had passed -

PM: The answer to that is no.

JOURNALIST: If the elections are held in Fiji over the Constitution ... by the Council of Chiefs, and if Rabuka is elected as Prime Minister and he attends the next Forum, obviously Mara is not going to attend. Will you attend the Forum, next Forum, next year if Rabuka comes?

PM: Yes, I'll be at the next Forum. Of course I will be. Well, when I say of course I will be, I mean, all other things being willing, but I don't have my attendance, whether it's at the Forum or at the Commonwealth, determined by other people. I go to the Forum and I go to the Commonwealth to represent Australia's point of view and to advance Australia's, both Australia's interests and Australia's concerns, as to how it may be able to be of assistance to others. If you take the situation of the Commonwealth, for instance, that group of some 50 nations, the fact that I sit down with some 49 other leaders from the Commonwealth doesn't mean that I embrace the Constitutional position of every state there at the Commonwealth. Far from it. There are Constitutional positions in some of the Commonwealth countries that, may I say, are significantly less democratic, significantly less democratic than the proposed Constitution of Fiji. But the fact is that you go, you discuss the issues that are before, whether it's the Forum or the Commonwealth, and you do it in a way which is based upon what you think is going to best advance the interests of your own country and the others with whom you're meeting.

JOURNALIST: (inaudible)

PM: I don't think anyone went into this Forum meeting believing that we were going to determine what the United States would do. But I think there is a chance that out of this meeting certain concerns that we have are going to be able to be addressed to the United States. Let me say that I believe that in talking to the United States

now I will not only have the authority of speaking as far as Australia is concerned, but I will certainly be able to say on particular issues that have been raised by my scientists that I've shared this information with my colleague countries in the South Pacific and they at least, at the very least, share those concerns. So that in speaking to the United States there will be that added authority. I believe that the United States will listen seriously to what we've got to say because I can assure you that I will be putting these issues to them very seriously.

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