



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
INTERVIEW WITH RAY MARTIN, A CURRENT AFFAIR
25 JULY 1994**

RM: Prime Minister, thanks for your time.

PM: Good, Ray.

RM: Now the UN Commander said today of Rwanda, said today, that had countries like Australia responded more quickly there would be hundreds and thousands of people alive there. How do you respond to that?

PM: Well, we were one of the first countries to respond. We put our first funds in there in April, that's now some months ago, and I think, and of course, we've been preparing for a substantial commitment to the UN Force which is about clearing the way for the refugees to go home. You see, the best way of dealing with a refugee problem, Ray, is to get people to actually go back to their houses, and their villages. They won't do that unless there is a stable scene there, so we've been preparing to make the major commitment we made today there, and as well as that, as you know today we've made a major commitment to the humanitarian aid. Now, I had a cable in last Friday, in fact I'll read it to you - it's directly from AIDAB - that's Australian aid abroad - officer said: "The situation in Goma has deteriorated since my visit there on Wednesday", and he said, "what is clear is that Goma is apocalyptic". Now that came in on Saturday. So, we've had a deterioration here, a very speedy one, unforeseen really, in the last few days and what we've now decided to do is bring our commitment up to \$10m in all, which is, which will be if not the largest, just about the largest, of all the financial commitments, and then we are sending two Hercules with water filtration equipment, and re-hydration equipment, rehydration kits for

people, and food aid and medical supplies, as well as the big force of over 300.

RM: So this equipment is going into the camps, as against going into Kigali?

PM: Going into the camps. Now, Kigali is where our officers will be with the 5,500 strong UN Force. That's basically about letting the refugees come home. See, they're too afraid to go home, and that's why they're stuck in these camps with all of this destruction and death and disease.

RM: What about those people, such as CARE and so on, who say that these people are too sick to travel - what we need is to prop them up for some months before we do anything back in Kigali?

PM: Well, some will travel Ray, and some would need to be propped up. I think what we need to do is do both, and what we're trying to do is respond to both challenges along the term one of getting the people back into Rwanda, which is now made somewhat more likely and easier by the fact that the Patriotic Front there now controls the country and there isn't a war still raging - so it's possible to resettle people - and then, to get as much support as we possibly can in food aid and medical supplies onto the people, on a humanitarian basis, in the border camps.

RM: Well, PM, if we accept that what you've done, that what the Government has done is very generous, would you agree though that for whatever reason we were pretty late in moving?

PM: No, well, I think..

RM: The western world..

PM: .. we sent over an observer team about a month ago to see whether the UN plan was feasible. See, Ray, we can't put Australian troops in a position of jeopardy, and there had to be a feasible scheme by the UN that worked. We went basically to case that out, to see whether that would happen, whether it was feasible. In the meantime, the Patriotic Front has actually succeeded, so the temperature within Rwanda politically has dropped and militarily has dropped. Our judgement is now that the plan can succeed and we are committing over 300 people. I don't think we could have done it any earlier.

RM: But do you accept what the UN Commander says, that had we been able to, for whatever reason, had we been able to get in earlier, the western countries, we may have saved hundreds and thousands of lives?

- PM: That could well be possible, but, I think, nobody foresaw the build up on the borders - the number of people leaving the country, that have built up on the borders - and, I think, it is to that we are now responding.
- RM: Mr Keating, you have got a small family as lots of us have - a young family. I mean, what do you say to them as they sit and watch television each night. How do you explain to your eight year old daughter that we can't just go in and feed them?
- PM: Well, I think, my family - probably the same with your own Ray, they sit there very quiet when they see this, very quiet - very sad and quiet. They know there is a bad thing going on here. I mean, I think, ... you know, some of that scenery over the weekend made me very determined, that I know Australians feel compassionate about these sorts of events and I wanted the Government today to respond to that compassion. I wanted us to be able to say well, we're there and we're doing our very best. Now, we have some influence, we have some financial power and some organisational ability and we are going to use it. So, the answer is my family's reaction, Ray, which was, you know, a sad one and one saying that, well, there is a certain helplessness about us in the face of this. I mean, the Government is not helpless and we've made, I think, the appropriate steps today to try and do our part as Australians.
- RM: I'd like to personalise that a little further. Obviously, if you sit there with your daughters and your son and your wife, do they say hang on dad, this is terrible, this unforgivable, we've got to do something?
- PM: Well, the reports over the weekend, I mean, I was only with them probably on one occasion where the news reports came in which showed the big helicopter pictures of the people there and the close ups and there was just the, sort of, I think, quiet and latent expressions of sadness. I think they were overcome by the pictures. Annita and I were talking about it saying how dreadful this scene is and how we ought to be getting something cracking there as quickly as possible.
- RM: You've suggested that they impacted on you so much that while you would have come in anyway for the Cabinet decision today, that it made you more determined to actually make a serious effort than you were?
- PM: Well, I think, more determined to be effective. More determined to make sure our presence was being felt. I mean, I think I know how Australians think about this. They would see this group of people in this desperate position with their loved ones dying around them and in their arms. Our sense of democracy and support for one another doesn't countenance those sorts of things. So, I wanted our response

today to be one the Australian people thought was both appropriate and they felt proud about.

RM: Alright, but the \$10 million figure, which is a very significant figure in world terms, would that have been as high as it is had you not been affected over the weekend?

PM: Probably not, Ray. Probably not.

RM: Why is it, it seems, that, every time in this wealthy world of ours, this world of plenty, it is always an African catastrophe? It always seems to be... if it is not the Sudan, it's Somalia, if it's not Somalia, it's Ethiopia, now it's Rwanda. Why is that? What do you say to your children?

PM: Well, I think it is about politics and it is about prospects for growth. There are enormous pockets of poverty and deprivation in Asia. But, the Asian economies are at least growing and gradually income standards are rising. This is not true in parts of the African continent.

RM: If perceptions is what we deal in, it seems easier, somehow, to forget black Africans when they die, than white people?

PM: Well, I think what Australians are saying today, certainly what I am saying and what the Government is saying - and, I'm sure, all Australians are saying - this should not be so. That, when there is a human tragedy, those of us who are able to respond should, no matter where it is.

RM: It seems, as well, you know, people saying that where there is oil at stake, for example, the West responds far more quickly than when it is just, simply, black Africans dying?

PM: Well, that, I think, is probably true. But, it is not right and it is events like these which test those sorts of attitudes.

RM: Alright, we thank you for your time.

PM: Thank you, Ray.

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