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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
INTERVIEW WITH KERRY O'BRIEN - THE 7.30 REPORT**

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O'BRIEN:

John Howard, what's your best advice on whether Sir Julius Chan is now back firmly in control in Papua New Guinea?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well the best I can really say is not terribly different from your own news reports and what Sean Dorney has just said. Clearly there's a new commander of the defence forces. We, of course, totally support the authority of the civilian government over the military. And the fact that Papua New Guinea has remained a constitutional democracy for the last 22 years is something that we warmly applaud and support. And to the extent that our view is relevant in the matter, we're completely on the side of Sir Julius Chan as the duly elected Prime Minister of the country in asserting his civilian authority over the military. The attitude we have to the Sandline operation in so far as it impacts on the bilateral association between our two countries is of course a completely separate matter. I think it's fair to say that - as Sean did in his report - that the particular exercise which was limited to a demonstration of attitude in relation to Sandline - that's over. Obviously the internal situation remains difficult and we'll follow developments very closely.

O'BRIEN:

This has been an ominous new development though, hasn't it in Papua New Guinea's history since independence? There was a point yesterday where it really did sound like a coup in the making. You must have had some uncomfortable moments and I wonder what you can say about the actions that you must have canvassed?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, not a lot and I think you'll understand it wouldn't be appropriate for me to do so. I neither want to dramatise the situation with easily colourful language or, on the other hand, play it down. It was and remains serious. Papua New Guinea is very close to us. We are seen by the rest of the world as having a special association with that country. It's not an easy relationship. We are the former metropolitan power - Papua New Guinea the former colony. We try to understand that. I respect the sovereignty of Papua New Guinea, but that doesn't relieve us of the responsibility to state our view if we think something is happening with which we don't agree. I want a stable, democratic Papua New Guinea. I want the duly elected civilian government of that country to remain in complete control and that is why I made it very clear today that we completely supported the right of the Prime Minister to dismiss the Commander of the defence forces and the unconstitutionality of what the Commander of the defence forces had done.

O'BRIEN:

Have you spoken to Sir Julius Chan since the revolt yesterday?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I haven't. I haven't thought that appropriate. Our views were immediately conveyed through a spokesman and my High Commissioner or our High Commissioner in Port Moresby has been in close contact with the government. I, of course, had a four to five hour meeting with Sir Julius in Sydney last Sunday week where we canvassed the whole gamut of the bilateral relationship. Naturally that conversation didn't contemplate any of the events of the past 48 hours. But it certainly canvassed our position on the mercenaries...

O'BRIEN:

And, in fact, you did tell Sir Julius face to face that there would be consequences in terms of our relationship with Papua New Guinea if he did go ahead with his plans to use mercenaries in Bougainville. That seems to have had no impact on him given what he said tonight?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, if you take his words at face value, yes that is true, it does not appear to have had any impact. I do want to make it clear as I did then, as I did in the Parliament this afternoon, that there will be consequences. Once again this is not a situation for overblown needlessly bellicose rhetoric but there should be no misunderstanding on anyone's part. But if those mercenaries are used in Bougainville there will be quite significant consequences.

O'BRIEN:

What will those consequences be?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't at this stage want to canvass those. I have put them very plainly and unambiguously to Sir Julius.

O'BRIEN:

I assume it must disappoint you that he doesn't regard them as being more important than his desire to use mercenaries.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don't want the mercenaries used. I think the introduction of mercenaries into PNG has led to some of the instability of the past few days. It's a wholly sordid, unwelcome development in our part of the world. I sympathise with Sir Julius in his Bougainville problem. We don't believe it can be solved by military action. We think it will be aggravated by the use of mercenaries. We have put forward some suitable alternatives to the use of those mercenaries. That offer remains on the table. I don't for reasons I ask you to understand want to go into the detail of what those reasonable alternatives are but our position is very clear and nothing in the last 48 hours has changed it. If those mercenaries are used then there will be consequences and they will be quite significant.

O'BRIEN:

In his press conference last night Sir Julius linked General Singirok's actions to Australia's protests over the mercenaries. What's your reaction to that?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't accept that analysis. I think the better view is that the instability of the past 48 hours is a product of the introduction of the mercenaries into that country.

O'BRIEN:

Very briefly, a couple of questions on the negotiations over native title and the Wik judgement, are you still confident that you can announce your solution by Easter as you had intended?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I said about Easter. I am not going to be tied to a particular day. I said around Easter. The discussions are still going on. Kerry, it's a hard ask to get an agreed outcome on this. I am trying very hard. The atmosphere of the talks has been better than I expected but we still have a long way to go.

O'BRIEN:

And very, very quickly, have you ruled out legislating to extinguish native title over pastoral leases?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I haven't ruled that out, no. The only two things I have ruled out are overturning the whole concept of native title, in other words rejecting the Mabo finding that under the common law such a thing as native title exists and the other thing I have ruled out is doing nothing because that's..

O'BRIEN:

Somewhere in between.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well somewhere in between, well, somewhere in between yes but I haven't ruled out extinguishment. I know the sensitivity of many in the community towards that and I certainly haven't ruled out amendments to existing legislation but I am trying very genuinely and very hard to achieve an agreed outcome that delivers justice to all of the parties and also security of tenure to Australia's pastoralists but also to others and respects the feeling of achievement that the Aboriginal people found when native title was said to exist by the High Court in the Mabo decision. Now if there is an instinct for goodwill amongst all of the parties it ought with a lot of effort be possible to get an agreed outcome. If there can't be an agreed outcome then I have a very clear view in my own mind now as to what course of action I will be recommending to my Cabinet colleagues and that will come, if it's not immediately after Easter it won't be too far after that.

O'BRIEN:

John Howard thanks for talking to us.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's a pleasure.

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