

**Public Statement on Australian Prime Minister's visit
by Rt Hon Sir Mekere Morauta
Port Moresby, April 4 2017**

Timing of Australian Prime Minister's visit is inappropriate



Former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta said today the proposed visit to Papua New Guinea by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is hard to fathom at this time, on the eve of PNG's national election.

Mr Turnbull came to office in September 2015 – over eighteen months ago. In all that time, he has visited many countries, all over the world. He has not found time to visit Papua New Guinea, one of Australia's most important neighbors. Why come now? What is so important now that cannot be dealt with by officials?

"The two Prime Ministers met in Australia a few weeks ago," Sir Mekere said. "They have met countless times at APEC, Pacific Islands' Forum Leaders' meetings, UN meetings, and I am sure they talk on the phone from time to time. What is so pressing now, when Papua New Guinea is suffering at the hands of this corrupt, incompetent, uncaring Government headed by Peter O'Neill?"

"It is insensitive and interfering for Mr Turnbull to pay homage to Mr O'Neill at this point in time."

Papua New Guineans will naturally see the visit as an endorsement of the current Prime Minister and his regime, and that is certainly how the Government will spin it.

That is a very dangerous position for the Australian Prime Minister to put himself in, especially with the prospect of a new Government just around the corner.

"Is this a re-play of 2012, when the Australian High Commissioner publicly endorsed Peter O'Neill in a written statement, and joyfully rushed to Government House to witness the Governor General inviting O'Neill to form a government – the only diplomat to do so?" Sir Mekere asked.

"Papua New Guineans will not thank Mr Turnbull for this visit.

"It will be seen as Mr Turnbull interfering in our national elections. It will be seen as Mr Turnbull setting back our nation's prospects of economic, financial and social recovery by supporting the very Government that has caused our current crisis."

Public opinion is firmly against the O'Neill Government, and Mr Turnbull's endorsement of it would be a slap in the face for the vast majority of Papua New Guineans. It also threatens to be a major setback for future Papua New Guinea-Australia relations.

Sir Mekere said the caretaker period is so close that any undertakings or agreements made during the visit would be virtually impossible for any new government to adhere to.

"What is so important that Mr Turnbull should be visiting now? What is so important that it cannot be conveyed to the incoming Government in a couple of months' time?" Sir Mekere said.

"If Mr O'Neill happens to be the Prime Minister after the election, fine, visit him then. We would all accept that. But to visit now is inappropriate.

"If the visit is about arrangements for APEC, Mr Turnbull needs to know that many Papua New Guineans think that the \$100 million plus that Australia has said it will spend on APEC security is a very bad use of Australian aid. That money would be much better spent on health and education and direct strengthening of oversight institutions like the Fraud Squad, the Police Prosecutor, the Public Prosecutor, the Ombudsman Commission, the Judicial Service, the Auditor General.

"Mr O'Neill will use this visit to prop up his sagging image, and boast to Papua New Guineans that he commands Australia's support.

"It would seem that APEC is becoming the new Manus, a trick by O'Neill to dazzle Australia into silence and into sanctioning his regime."

Sir Mekere said he recognised that it was the Australian Prime Minister's right to visit whoever and whenever he chose, but it was also his right as a citizen of PNG to comment and object.