

Public statement
by Rt Hon Sir Mekere Morauta
Port Moresby, 16 May 2017

Ombudsman Commission should investigate mercenary deal



Former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta said today the Police Commissioner, Mr Gary Baki, should immediately suspend the use of foreign mercenaries, in the interest of public order and safety and until an independent investigation has been conducted into all aspects of his secret deal.

The Ombudsman Commission should investigate the arrangements, including the financial and legal aspects, he said.

“Mr Baki’s media statement on this scandal yesterday raises more questions than it answers,” Sir Mekere said.

“It casts serious doubt about the probity and legality of the deal, with Laurence Aviation and Security of the US, and whether the activities of Mr Baki, other senior policemen and the mercenaries themselves were within the law.

“Mr Baki says he is ‘engaged in discussions’ with LAS. If that is correct, then on what basis are his mercenaries patrolling our streets? On the other hand Metropolitan Superintendent Ben Turi says the men are on contract. Who is telling the truth?”

Sir Mekere said the public has not been fooled by Mr Baki’s statements. Social media is continuing to raise many important questions about the deal and to express public concern about these heavily armed men patrolling the streets of Port Moresby. He said some people had also expressed their concern directly to him. Even the NCD Governor, Powes Parkop, said he was petrified at the sight of these men.

Mr Baki claims that the arrangements are for APEC security, yet the Prime Minister has said publicly that he knew nothing about it. Neither did the head of the APEC Secretariat, Mr Chris Hawkins. Was this deal raised at last week’s APEC Security Partners’ Working Group meeting and have the Australia, New Zealand and US partners at that meeting been advised of the deal?

There are also worrying inconsistencies in official comments about the arrangements. Mr Baki says in his media statement that only two men are in Papua New Guinea. Yet he has privately said there are five. His Metropolitan Superintendent, Ben Turi, who has been involved with the mercenaries, is reported in the media as saying that six are in the country. Social media has carried photographs of at least four men.

“Who is telling the truth,” Sir Mekere asked. “No-one, it appears. That is why an independent investigation is required to get to the bottom of this scandal and put people’s minds at rest.”

Aspects of the deal with LAS that should be investigated include whether the Mr Baki put his deal out to public tender and whether the procedures followed the Public Finance (Management) Act, its cost and whether funding was made available in this year’s Budget.

Sir Mekere said there are security and safety arrangements between Papua New Guinea and its international APEC partners, including for funding security operations. Is the deal with LAS to be funded under these arrangements, and were PNG’s APEC partners advised of the existence of the arrangements, he asked.

“Are steps that must be taken to deal with the police shortcomings identified by LAS going to be funded by our APEC partners? It is highly unlikely that the Government can provide the funding.

“It cannot even fund police operations for the election, with only K10 million of the promised K100 million being provided.”

Sir Mekere said serious question arise of why Mr Baki chose to recruit an unknown US company of dubious reputation to train a rapid response squad for APEC security rather than going to the Australian Federal Police or New Zealand police, who have extensive experience in Papua New Guinea and extensive expertise in security operations such as this.

“It is highly suspicious. Why not go to the AFP instead of recruiting people who parade around out of uniform carrying high-powered weapons in public view”, he asked. “What sort of cowboy outfit is LAS? Their activities not only call into question their own professionalism, they damage the reputation of our own police force.”

An independent investigation should establish whether or not the company, set up only in May last year, has the necessary skills and reputation, or whether other contractors would have been more suitable, more responsible and able to deliver value for money. Given the cowboy behavior of the mercenaries, Mr Baki should also explain whether or not he sought to confirm that the mercenaries are fit and proper persons to be carrying high-powered weapons and engaging in police activities.

“The public has a right to know the answers to these and other questions they are asking,” Sir Mekere said.

Sir Mekere said he was also concerned about Mr Baki's statement that the rapid response team would continue to operate after APEC. "Why," Sir Mekere asked. "What is the need for it and what purposes will it serve? Will mercenaries continue to be involved in it?"

Mr Baki's statement also does not explain how LAS employees are allowed to carry high-powered weapons in public when Australian Federal Police, also sworn in as special constables, were not. And have they been granted immunity from prosecution, which was refused to the AFP. What powers have they been given?

The public is entitled to know the Terms of Reference of the deal and the mission statement under which the LAS mercenaries are operating, Sir Mekere said. The public is entitled to know whether all Mr Baki's arrangements are legal.

"So far all we have received are misleading and contradictory statements that do nothing to ease the confusion and fear in people's minds," he said. "The public deserves better."