

**Statement by Rt Hon Mekere Morauta, KCMG
December 6 2015**

Former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta today urged the National and Fly River Provincial Governments to make available the K40 million promised to fight the tuberculosis crisis in Western, Gulf and Central provinces.

“The money is needed right now if the National Health Department, Provincial Health, NGOs and aid agencies are to halt the spread of TB, treat those who have it, and stop the crisis spreading,” he said.

“Cabinet approved this money six months ago and it still has not materialised.

“In the meantime lives are being lost and more are being placed at risk.”

Sir Mekere quoted a recent joint statement on the issue by the National Department of Health and the World Health Organisation:

“The problem of TB throughout the country and in particular the Multi-Drug-Resistant TB situation in three hotspots (National Capital District, Daru and Gulf) is a matter of great national concern.

“The problem of MDR-TB in Daru is unprecedented in a population of this size; containment of MDR-TB in Daru is a matter of the UTMOST URGENCY.

“The cost of inaction will be catastrophic in terms of lives lost, and astronomical in terms of financial cost.”

Sir Mekere said spending to save the lives of vulnerable people – especially children and older people – was more important than any other spending.

“It is not good enough to be spending K2 billion on the recent Pacific Games and K3 billion on the forthcoming APEC Conference rather than the health of the nation.

“The Government should put the people first, not promote itself through showpiece events and infrastructure.

Spending hundreds of millions destroying Paga Hill, digging up perfectly good roads and building aerial highways in Port Moresby might look like national development, but Papua New Guinea is not Port Moresby.

“The real cost of showpiece events and infrastructure is primary health care, education, and maintaining important infrastructure like the Highlands Highway. Our priorities seem to be upside down.”

Sir Mekere said he was especially concerned about the use of Ok Tedi funds that should be spent in Western Province, where the drug-resistant tuberculosis crisis was the worst in the nation.

Since the expropriation of Ok Tedi from PNG Sustainable Development Program, development spending in Western has virtually ceased.

“Instead we find money that should be spent on health, as well as other sectors such as education, communications, transport, law and order and so on, being wasted on dubious investments such as hotels and resorts,” he said.

“Hundreds of millions of kina from Ok Tedi shares held on behalf of Western Province people in the Mineral Resources Development Company is being misapplied by the Government.

“For example MRDC has spent \$US99 million on a luxury resort in Fiji and plans to spend \$US440 million on a luxury Hilton Hotel in Port Moresby.

“That is K1.6 billion at today’s exchange rate – which should be spent on productive investments such as health and education.

“Most importantly the people of Western Province are being denied the right to judge the value of those investments because of the lack of transparency at MRDC.

“Its web site has been ‘under reconstruction’ for months now. Must we assume that this is deliberate, to hide the details of these and other investments from public scrutiny?”

“Western Province people are being made to suffer because MRDC and Ok Tedi have been turned into piggy banks for the Government to raid.”

Sir Mekere said the misuse of funds that should be going to health and education was worsening the effects of spending cuts in the 2016 Budget.

The Health budget for 2016 has been cut by 12% compared to the 2015 Budget. It will be cut by a further 46.9% in the 2017 Budget compared to 2015.

“These spending cuts, coupled with corruption and waste and mismanagement, are a major reason for the TB crisis,” Sir Mekere said.

“Put simply, the Government has ignored the importance of health spending and has chosen to direct funds towards showpiece projects that are of doubtful value.”

“I urge the Government to put people first by immediately delivering the K23 million to fight TB that was promised six months ago. This money, along with the Provincial Government’s promise of K17 million for the Emergency TB Response, will go a long way to help arrest the spread of TB.

“The longer we wait, the more people will die.”