MEDIA STATEMENT

Thursday 14th February 2019

Welcome Address by Dr Osborne Sanida, Director, PNG NRI, at the Launch of the Bougainville Referendum Research Project Report: ‘Status of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and Implications for the Referendum’

May I extend to you all a warm welcome to the launch of the research paper on the ‘Status and Implementation of the Bougainville Peace Agreement and Implications for Referendum’ by Dr Kylie McKenna of the University of Technology, Sydney. May I take the opportunity to extend a special welcome to Honourable Joseph Lera, the Regional Member for Bougainville to the National Parliament and also the Deputy Chair of the Bi-Partisan Committee on Bougainville Affairs who has accepted our invitation to launch the Research Report. This is the last of the six research papers produced by the PNG-NRI under its Bougainville Referendum Research Project (BRRP) that is headed by Dr Thomas Webster. Dr Webster has earlier made some specific remarks on the paper being launched today.

So, I want to focus on why the PNG-NRI places priority on ongoing research undertaken on the Bougainville Referendum that was agreed to as a key element of the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) that ended a terrible ten-year civil war.

The future of Bougainville’s political governance arrangement will be determined through a Referendum where the people of Bougainville will choose between ‘Greater autonomy’ and ‘Independence’. The target date set for the referendum of 15th June 2019 is just four months away.

This event has major implications for the future of Bougainville and for Papua New Guinea. PNG NRI is the premier publicly funded policy think-tank in Papua New Guinea (PNG) mandated by legislation to carry out independent research and analysis on development issues affecting PNG.

The National Research Institute Act (1993) states that the functions of NRI are: “The promotion of research into Papua New Guinea Society and the economy”, and in particular
“the undertaking of research into social, political and economic problems of Papua New Guinea in order to enable practical solutions to such problems to be formulated” (Section 5, NRI Act, 1993).

The PNG NRI Council in its wisdom decided to establish the Bougainville Referendum Research Project to help us understand better and prepare for the planned referendum since this event has social, political, and economic ramifications for Papua New Guinea of which Bougainville is a part.

A total of five research reports, and the one being launched today being the sixth, have been produced by independent researchers on topics ranging from “What is a referendum and why it is being held” to “What are the possible outcomes and the implications of how they could be implemented”. These studies have drawn on international comparative analysis to inform discussions in preparation for the referendum and in understanding the implications of the choices on offer. The hope is that these research reports will contribute to the preparations for the referendum and in the implementation of the outcome following the voting by the people of Bougainville.

Some of you will recall that the PNG-NRI held a National Conference on the Bougainville Referendum last June with the theme “Implementation of the Peace Agreement and Implications for the Referendum”. This was indeed the very first national conversation on the referendum drawing attention to the importance of the event for the nation as well as for all parties to give greater attention to the preparations. I want to restate what I said then at that time.

At that time, I said “PNG is preparing to host two very important events, PNG APEC in 2018 and the Bougainville Referendum 2019. Hosting APEC will be a very significant and historic event for PNG and it is fitting that we give it priority attention.” Since then, we have successfully hosted many World leaders and it was a very successful event. As I said then, they will have come and they have gone.

I pointed out then that the other important event was the Bougainville Referendum. I highlighted the importance of giving it as much attention and support as APEC. I said then
that, unlike APEC, the people of Bougainville and PNG will remain and continue to live together as we have always done, interlinked in many ways. The implications of “What we do” and “How we do it” in this important event, the Bougainville Referendum, will remain for generations to come.

The referendum is an important milestone in the journey of Papua New Guinea to peace and prosperity. The decade long conflict in Bougainville cost thousands of lives and had a negative impact in the development of the nation. Consequently, the Peace Agreement entered into in August 2001 was a historical moment for our nation. The “Referendum” is a key milestone and one of the three pillars of the Peace Agreement.

It is in the interest of every citizen of PNG that the Referendum is well prepared and well administered, in a manner that all parties respect the outcome, and results in continuing peace for the people of Bougainville and PNG more broadly.

On this note and without sounding alarmist, I want to reiterate and highlight some concerns as the Director of the PNG NRI. I am concerned that the preparations underway to date for the referendum is behind schedule with only four months to go before the target date of 15th June 2019. The deadline of June 2020, when the Referendum must be held as per the BPA looms ever closer every day.

Consequently, we run the risk of either deferring the referendum from the June 15th target date and/or holding one without adequate preparation.

I note and the reasons for my concern are:

The electoral rolls are yet to be completed on Bougainville. We also see concerns raised by Bougainvilleans living outside of Bougainville not knowing how they will register and to be able to vote in the Referendum.

The Voters lack information regarding the choices on offer; for example, what does “Greater Autonomy” mean. Many questions have been raised by Bougainvilleans around this choice and yet no clarity on this option has been provided.
I also understand that the bulk of the budgeted K50 million or so for the referendum operations remains to be released. I therefore appeal to the authorities to release all of the promised funds immediately and commit themselves to holding the referendum in time. Rushing into a referendum without adequate preparations could compromise the credibility of the outcome and pose serious implications. Our research reports all point out the importance of thorough preparations, sound administration and a process enabling free and fair voting where the results are credible and accepted by all parties. The Referendum is a one-off event, and we ALL will live with the effects of the Referendum for a long time afterwards. It is therefore imperative that we give it the attention and priority that this very important NATIONAL event deserves.

Once Again, thank you all for coming and attending this launch. I do hope that you will read this report and engage with the discussions on the referendum.

Authorised by:
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Director, PNG NRI