



Speech by

Mr BRUCE LAMING

MEMBER FOR MOOLOOLAH

Hansard 30 July 1998

MOTION OF CONDOLENCE Tsunami Disaster, Papua New Guinea

Mr LAMING (Mooloolah—LP) (10.27 a.m.): As a former patrol officer in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s, I would like to take the opportunity of joining the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and other members in this condolence motion for those families who have lost loved ones in the recent tidal wave disaster. Although it is now 20 years since I worked with PNG villagers, I remember clearly their carefree approach to life. This was particularly the case in the coastal villages where they depended, and still do I am sure, on the bounty of the sea. Not only did much of their food source come from the sea but it also provided a valuable transport facility for their outrigger canoes and modern vessels.

This idyllic lifestyle is not, of course, without its interruptions. The highlands are only now just recovering from a drought which devastated their sweet potato crops. Earthquakes are not uncommon in PNG: the locals call them Guira and they are quite alarming when they occur, but usually they are harmless. Not so the earthquake in the ocean off the northern coast of Sandaun Province on 17 July.

The events that followed have been well covered in the media, but we should pause to reflect on the absolute shock and disbelief that would have overwhelmed those villagers as the usually bountiful sea swept their homes and lives away on that fateful night. The response to the tragedy, both locally and from overseas, was rapid. The doctors and nurses who took the initial brunt of the catastrophe in Vanimo and other centres are to be commended.

I have received a briefing from the Office of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Kathy Sullivan. I understand that the confirmed death toll stands at 1,638 and that a further 700 are in hospital. The emphasis has now swung towards disease prevention and rehabilitation. There has been considerable assistance from Australia by way of medical care and grief counselling services. Generous assistance has also arrived from New Zealand, the United States, Japan, France and other countries. All levels of government in Australia have rallied, as well as business, community organisations and individuals.

I also received a briefing from the Minister for Public Works and Housing and am pleased to see that the department is standing by to provide further assistance if requested by Emergency Management Australia. In supporting this condolence motion I acknowledge the support that all members are giving in their respective communities to those who are coordinating the many assistance programs. Most of us can only imagine the depth of sadness being experienced by those who have lost so much so quickly. I can best express our sympathy in their own language: Mipela i tok sori tumas long planti birua long ol manmeri bilong Aitape.
