



Speech by

**Mr S. ROBERTSON**

**MEMBER FOR SUNNYBANK**

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Hansard 20 June 2000

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

**Solomon Islands Evacuation**

**Hon. S. ROBERTSON** (Sunnybank—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (10.12 a.m.), by leave: When the Commonwealth decided to evacuate Australians and other foreign nationals from the strife-torn Solomon Islands they turned to Queensland for help. The Department of Emergency Services was given responsibility as lead agency coordinating the efforts of the many State and Commonwealth agencies involved in last week's repatriation of evacuated persons into Australian ports of entry. Canberra looked to Queensland because we have the most experienced and professional counter disaster and rescue organisation in Australia.

My department's Counter Disaster and Rescue Services Division is responsible for planning and coordinating the State response to natural disasters such as cyclone and flood that impact upon Queensland communities each year. It also has well-rehearsed contingency plans for dealing with the mass evacuation of civilian populations in the event of a major emergency. As such, it was the right agency with the necessary logistical skill and resources to plan and coordinate such a large and complex operation at short notice.

For the record, some 1,005 Australian and foreign nationals from 33 countries have so far arrived through Queensland ports of entry at Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville in the past week. The operation to get them here has involved HMAS Tobruk and eight evacuation flights using military aircraft tasked by the New Zealand and Royal Australian Air Forces.

Getting the people here was one thing. The biggest and most complex part of the operation, however, involved what to do with them once they had arrived. There were customs and immigration procedures to follow. Were people sick and needing medical help? Had families been separated? Did evacuees need assistance with transport or temporary accommodation? Was financial assistance needed? All these contingencies had to be considered by CDRS as part of the planning for an operation that was reliant upon a well-coordinated and well-managed effort involving many different State and Commonwealth agencies.

Other agencies involved in the joint operation included Customs and Immigration, Emergency Management Australia, Defence, Queensland Health, Queensland Transport, the State Emergency Service, the Queensland Police Service, the Queensland Ambulance Service, Centrelink and the State Department of Families, Youth and Community Care. Also involved were the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Suncorp-Metway, Qantas, the Queensland tourism industry, Telstra, the Cairns Port Authority, Brisbane Airport Corporation and consular officials from many nations.

It was a big operation, but Counter Disaster and Rescue Services took on the challenges it presented and brought to the effort all of its skills and experience born of dealing with natural disasters in Queensland. That the operation was conducted so efficiently and went off without a hitch speaks volumes about the professionalism and expertise of our counter disaster personnel and the other Queensland agencies involved.

I pay a particular tribute to Mr Jack Noye, executive director of the Counter Disaster and Rescue Services Division, and Mr Wayne Ripper, director of Disaster Operations, for their leadership. But it is to the CDRS personnel who coordinated evacuee reception operations in Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane that the real kudos belongs. To Syd Churchill in Cairns, Paul McAlonan in Townsville and Mike Morrison in Brisbane—and all their personnel— congratulations on a job well done.