

MONDAY 4TH OCTOBER 2010

The Speaker, Sir Allan Kemakeza took the Chair at 9.37 a.m.

Prayers.

ATTENDANCE

At prayers, all were present with the exception of the Minister of Mines, Energy & Rural Electrification; Lands & Housing and the Members for West Kwara'ae, Aoke/Langa Langa.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Mystery plane crash: East Malaita

26. Mr SOGAVARE to the Minister of Police, National Security & Correctional Services: Concerning the sighting of the mystery plane by the people of East Malaita, can the Minister inform Parliament as follows: What steps were taken by the government to verify the report? What is the finding of the report?

Hon. TORA: I would like to thank my colleague Member for East Choiseul for asking this very important question for the interest of our people in East Malaita. We have heard what has happened, and this kind of incident not only happens in East Malaita but it also happened long ago in Makira where people there also told of a similar sighting but there has been no attempt to verify what has been sighted there.

Anyway for the sake of the question asked by the good honorable Member for East Choiseul, I have the following answers from the Ministry and the Police who helped to provide the answers. Bear with me as I am going to take a bit of time to answer this question in order to clarify it.

On Tuesday 7th September 2010 around 17.45 and 18.15 hours, a number of persons from the villages of Ogou, which is about five (5) kilometres north of Atoifi and 20 kilometres south of Atori in East Malaita, reported that as they looked out to sea towards Leli Island, they saw a small aircraft emitting smoke from the rear and was travelling south. The plane was then seen to crash into the sea. This sighting was also confirmed by persons from Canaan Village as well as from witnesses who also confirmed that a small canoe had attempted to go out to the ocean area of the crash site which was about 4 to 5 km from the mainland, but turned back because of bad weather.

When the Atoifi Royal Solomon Islands Police Force received and confirmed these reports, they immediately contacted the Honiara Radio Communications at the Police Headquarters. This was communicated at 1900 hrs and it was confirmed that all aircraft from Honiara were accounted for. The Honiara Communications Unit took it further by notifying the PPF Provincial Policing with a view to formulate a plan of approach to respond to investigations.

On Tuesday 7th September 2010 at 14:20 hours, the same night, the PPF Provincial Policing received the aircraft crash information from the Honiara Communications and therefore notified the Participating Police Force (PPF) Coordinator in Auki, the Maritime Team Leader. The PPF Coordinator in Auki commenced liaising with the RSIPF and the Atori Police.

Based on indicative probability that an aircraft had crashed, the PPF deployed a helicopter with Air Support Unit and Forward Looking Infrared capability to search the suspected crash area. On Wednesday 8th September 2010, the search of the ocean area in Atori was delayed and commenced at 0100 hours and with deteriorating weather conditions, the search was

shortened and ceased at 0200 hrs. On the conclusion of this preliminary search response by the helicopter, it was confirmed that there was no sighting of any plane debris in the search pattern area. The next step then was to further zoom into the area of interest. At 0200 hrs, a Tier 2 boat departed Auki heading for Malu'u where at first light continued on to Atoifi where it arrived between 0800 hours and 0900 hours. The Tier 2 arrived in Atoifi and met with the RSIPF and local witnesses to the alleged plane crash. The Tier 2 and 3 banana boats conducted sea search of the area during daylight hours between 0900 hours and 1700 hours. There was no sighting of any plane debris, oil trails or bodies in the search area.

The PPF Provincial Coordinator met the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Communications and Aviation, the Director of the Solomon Islands Civil Aviation Authority (SICAA) and Chief Air Traffic Services to discuss the report of the alleged plane crash and the findings so far. They formulated a plan intended action by all parties. It was during this meeting that it was agreed that the SICAA will have "carriage of the investigation" in accordance to the legal obligations and provisions outlined in the Civil Aviation Act 2009 which relates to the legal authority of the Solomon Islands Civil Aviation Authority to investigate and enforce the rules based system under which civil aviation operates. Accordingly, SICAA sent an investigation team to Atoifi to work with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. The team consists of SICAA officials, the Solomon Islands Maritime Rescue personnel and members of the Royal Solomon Islands Police supported by PPF personnel. The PPF also provided assistance by airlifting three drums of fuel by helicopter from Auki to Atoifi to assist local boats conducting search of the area. The PPF Coordinator at Auki continued liaison with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and the Provincial Police Commander and then travelled to Atoifi to meet SICAA investigation team and assist the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force TO plan and manage the search of the sea as required. Warning orders were issued to the PPF, the RSIPF Disaster Victim Identification, Forensics and National Criminal Investigations Department in preparation and anticipation of locating a crash site and potential casualties.

On Thursday 9th September 2010, SICAA investigation team arrived on the ground in Atoifi and worked with the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the PPF to investigate the plane crash report. No evidence was found on the sea or land to support the report of a plane crash.

The PPF Coordinator in Auki and SICAA investigation team left Atoifi on the 11th September 2010. A debriefing meeting chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Communications and Aviation was convened where the RSIPF, the PPF, the Solomon Islands Search and Rescue and Air Traffic Services were present. The meeting made a resolution to terminate the operation and agreed that the Atoifi RSIPF continue to monitor the area for a further 14 days.

As you would realize, the steps undertaken by the various government agencies with the assistance of the PPF are of high standard and well coordinated. It is very thorough and therefore reflects the high cooperation existing within the Solomon Islands Government Agencies and the PPF. It also reflects the urgent response that government agencies can act with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force taking the initial leading role hence I must commend them for their actions.

In answer to question (b), as already covered in my answer to part (a), which is quite comprehensive, the findings revealed that there is no evidence of any plane crash and no evidence of any plane debris were found and that it is still a mystery.

Mr Sogavare: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to ask a supplementary question. The Minister made reference to 14 days put off when after doing those work they decide to

put the progress of the search and whatever they were doing for 14 days. After the 14 days what else were you doing?

Hon. Tora: I would like to thank the honorable colleague Member for East Choiseul for that supplementary question. After those 14 days my office did not get any further information about the plane crash.

Mr ABANA: Thank you Minister for your comprehensive answer. The Minister also said there were similar sightings in Makira. Can the Minister explain what made those sightings similar to the one at Atoifi?

Hon. Tora: I mentioned that Makira has similar sightings of an aircraft. One example I can cite is that some people in West Makira way back in the 80s have seen a same kind of aircraft flying above the trees and then plunging down into the bush. That is one real story coming from there. When that plane disappeared into the bush, they could not see anything and so the people ran to the place they thought they saw it going down and searched the place but they did not find any aircraft. They even saw a speed boat when they went fishing at night but when they went closer it disappeared and they did not see it.

Mr HANARIA: You would agree with me that this is costing the government when we do not have reliable information for the government to act on. My question is, how reliable does your Ministry assess information of such nature before committing government to involve in a search?

Hon. Tora: It is reliable information that comes from people who saw it with their own eyes. When information reached the Police and other relevant authorities, they cannot turn a blind eye to such information but they have to carry out investigations into it. Because if they just sit down after getting information without doing anything is not good because it will only create complaints and all that from that area. Although the government spent money on that investigation I think it is only proper and is fitting.

Mr HOUANIPWELA: This is a matter of interest to some of us. As the Minister mentioned, reports that come pointed to similar sightings in different places and the Minister has just mentioned that it is already a mystery to some people. The Minister's report seems to indicate that this will remain a mystery. I want to know whether the government wants this thing to remain a mystery.

Hon Tora: My answer to part (b) of the question states very clearly that there is no evidence and so it will still remain a mystery.

Mr SOALAOI: I have two very short supplementary questions for the Minister. I would have thought that if someone says he actually sees the thing then there is no need to waste time to go and find out. My question is whether the Minister of Police knows exactly how many people sighted the plane, and also in the Minister's answer at the end he mentioned that the incident remains a mystery which I want the Minister to explain to us in what ways has the incident become a mystery to our people.

Hon Tora: The question asked was already made clear. I have already answered that question in the lengthy answer I have given. If any sightings happen again, I believe relevant authorities will continue to investigate if it is going to cause fear to people in any particular area that sighted the plane. But I do not have information as to the number of people who have seen the plane.

Mr Abana: The Minister mentioned that people from Ogou and Canaan actually sighted the plane or something else from a distance of about four to five kilometers. Minister, I did not

hear you say whether they actually heard any sound of explosion coming from the impact of the plane going into the sea. I only heard you say that the people only saw the plane ditching into the sea but whether there is any explosion. Can you clarify that?

Hon Tora: The information I received was that the people saw smoke coming out of the plane when it seemed to crash into the sea.

Hon MAELANGA: Thank you for allowing me to contribute briefly to questions raised by my colleague Members on the other side to the Minister of Police. I think this incident happened in my constituency and therefore I would like to inform the House that sightings like this have been happening there a long time ago, and when this report came it confirmed that there is nothing and so even those of us in East Malaita are not too sure what this is all about. If we start to think this is an UFO or try to study areas like that you will start to be aware of things like this. We even heard about similar sightings in Makira like my people are seeing lights and when they went and check they find nothing.

It is good that this thing has happened and police report confirms that there is no evidence of a plane crash. I mean for us in East Malaita it is a bit strange to us that such a thing like that happens but for us to actually know what that is, we do not know. I just want to clarify this to the House so that we know. I do not know about other places but where the incident happened, from my village in the middle of the bush I can look down to the sea and during some of my times in my village I can see this strange sighting. I can see lights appearing which later on disappeared and when people go down to check there is nothing. I just want to clarify this to the House for the information of Members of Parliament.

I think the report given by the Police is very clear and all of us should be satisfied with. All the detailed information we might need from the Police has been given by the Minister of Police this morning and therefore I do not think we should ask the Minister of Police any further questions because it is very clear there.

Mr Sogavare: As rightly expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister, I think the question has been fully answered by the Minister for Police. This side of the House only has the duty to ensure our people are safe. What actually happened was reported by the people that they actually sight things crashing into the seas and it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Police and National Security to ensure that we know exactly what is happening. Since this thing has happened and has become public knowledge, I think we should be putting more emphasis to actually establish what has really happened instead of just ruling them off as something that just happens. There are things called UFO so that is the concern of this side of the House. In saying that, I thank the Minister for responding to the question.