

**Statement by the Prime Minister Hon. Peter O'Neill CMG MP on
the Report on the Commission of Inquiry into Special Agriculture
and Business Leases**

Mr Speaker, on the 21 July 2011, the then Acting Prime Minister Hon Sam Abal MP established a Commission of Inquiry into Special Agriculture and Business Leases.

On the 14 March 2013, the Commission of Inquiry provided me with an *interim* report, which dealt with terms of reference (a), (b) and (h). Which is an outline of the legal authority and processes for issuing SABLs and an assessment of the legal and policy framework.

Mr Speaker, in the May session of Parliament I made a parliamentary statement highlighting my dissatisfaction with the Commission for its failure to produce a final report and I gave them a deadline of the 24 June 2013 to produce the final report.

Mr Speaker, on the 24 June 2013, I received a final report. The report is comprised of the following documents.

First, the *Commission of Inquiry into Special Agriculture and Business Leases Final Report* this was prepared by Commissioner John Numapo and dated the 24 June 2013.

This document contains an examination of **17** SABLs and contains the main recommendations of the Commission.

Mr Speaker, I also received another document called the *Commission of Inquiry into Special Agriculture and Business Lease* dated June 2013 prepared by Commissioner Nicolas Mirou. This document contains an overview of the administrative procedures and legal requirements for issuing an SABL, an examination of **25** SABLs and some more general recommendations.

Mr Speaker, the Commission of Inquiry was asked to examine **75** SABLs. However, the final report examines only **42**. This is due to the fact that Commissioner Jerewai has failed to contribute any material to the final report. It would appear that the Commissioners failed to work together as a team and their own personal differences have had a direct impact on the quality of the report produced.

Mr Speaker this is very disappointing.

However, the 42 leases that are reported reveal a shocking trend of mismanagement and corruption in all stages in the process. Out of the 42 leases reported on only in **4 leases** was there bona fides land owner consent and a commercially viable agricultural project being undertaken. The remaining leases were seriously compromised. The success rate is appalling.

Mr Speaker, the only conclusion that I can draw is that the policy on SABLs has failed miserably.

However, despite these findings the Commission has recommended that SABLs be continued. The Commission has instead made a number of general recommendations in an effort to improve the integrity of the process.

Mr Speaker, this is not acceptable. Something drastic needs to be done.

Mr Speaker, this government is going to start protecting landowners and the environment. We will no longer watch on as foreign owned companies come in and con our landowners, chop down our forests and then take the proceeds offshore.

Mr Speaker, the Minister for Lands and Physical Planning will be appointing a Task Force to identify a new legislative framework to;

- provide for the conversion of customary land into lease hold land for the benefit of landowners;
- protect the interests of landowners: and
- ensure sustainable land use.

Mr Speaker, the primary consideration will be protecting the interests of landowners and the environment. For too long, landowners have been taken advantage of and had their land stolen from under them.

Mr Speaker, the Task Force will be consulting widely and there will be an opportunity for everyone to contribute. The use of customary land is a sensitive issue and this government is committed to getting it right.