**CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE**

of

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**CHRISTMAS OF PANDEMIC AND HOPE**

**Fr Giorgio Licini - General Secretary**

**Press Conference**

**Monday, 21 December 2020 – 11:am**

**COVID-19**

Nobody could foresee a pandemic to break out and change our way of living and thinking. Though Papua New Guinea and the countries of the Pacific have been least affected in terms of infections compared to other parts of the world, still the disruption has been significant. Travels have been reduced. People got stuck overseas. Projects came to a halt waiting for clarity. **Jobs have been lost.**

**We commend the PNG government for the realistic and effective approach, open to the suggestions of science and international cooperation.** The weak health care system of the country was not overwhelmed. People did not die in their homes or in the streets. There was no chance for absurd accusations of sorcery and witchcraft. Needless, to say, however, that the risk is not over yet. The virus still prospers in many other countries of the world, especially the most developed in Europe and America. **It can still catch up with the Pacific.**

**PNG POLITICAL CRISIS**

**It was a disappointment to see Papua New Guinea descend into a political play during such a health crisis and an economic crisis.** The public could not understand and justify it. There is nothing wrong with political ambitions and political moves by the people’s representatives. But the motivations should be strong and evident, not pretentious, debated in Parliament and not in remote and isolated locations with occasional and precarious political allies.

We acknowledge, however, the efforts of the government and Parliament to pass (96-0) the bill that established the Independent Commission Against Corruption. Now it must be allowed to properly operate.

**REFUGEES**

**We regret the fact that 95 refugees and 42 asylum seekers brought to PNG by Australia in 2013 are still in the country.** A few are expected to still be resettled to the US. But for others there seems to be no option. A Canada solution for some may be still two years away. We plan to engage directly the AU High Commission on the matter early next year.

We are also surprised at the fact that about 185 individuals taken for medical reasons to Australia from PNG and Nauru during the year 2019 for medical reasons are still in hotel detention (APOD: Alternative Place of Detention). They are confined to hotel room without access to fresh air. That is worse than being in a jail. **Working with the Australian government for development in PNG is becoming increasingly hard for us for the ethical and moral implications.**

**FRATELLI TUTTI**

It was such a consolation, therefore, the gift of the encyclical letter “Fratelli Tutti” (*All Brothers*) by Pope Francis on the 4th of October, Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The post-coronavirus world will have to look different. Some of what the pandemic has forced on us, such as a reduced attack on the environment or a lower quantity on emission of greenhouse gases, will have to become a choice and a decision. **The pandemic has been a warning that nature is still in control and is unpredictable.** We have been told to pause and to think; not to proceed with business as usual. Universal brotherhood is the key to fighting misfortune and to averting it.

**CHRISTMAS 2020**

It is not going to be a very happy Christmas this year. Still the baby laid in a manger is a ray of hope. **The smile we share can be more contagious than the virus still haunting us.** The new year 2021 will be more desired than ever. May it bring an end to our sufferings and a renewed sense of unity and service.

**Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands!**