



## **THE PRICE OF POLITICS**

*The following is an editorial opinion first printed in the **Vanuatu Daily Post** on January 27, 2016, concerning the suspension of air service by virtually all international airlines servicing Vanuatu.*

Throughout Vanuatu and across the region, an outcry has arisen over our inability to keep international air travel safe. The prospect we face now—the possibility of only one remaining carrier willing to land at all, and only when the airstrip has been swept clean of debris—is a national disgrace.

It's scandalous, too. Even knowing that our airstrip is than half a decade past its use-by date, some were still willing to treat the airport upgrade as nothing more than a political football. Looking back over the past months, it's hard to see if concern for traveler safety ever came into the picture.

It didn't have to be this way. In August of 2014, the Bauerfield Airport Rehabilitation Committee, or BARC, was struck with a mandate to compile and detail the known issues concerning the airport, and to recommend a way forward.

A March 2015 report on the status of the airport, presented to the National Trade Development Committee by the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office stated: "The runway was last resurfaced in 2000 with an estimated design life of between 8 to 10 years.... The runway pavement, the stop areas and thresholds are currently deteriorating and urgently need an overall pavement overlay."

The biggest danger here, cited by Air New Zealand as they announced their suspension of service, is FOD—Foreign Object Damage. The new Airbus and Boeing aircraft that modern carriers use have larger, more powerful jet engines, and if one of these were to suck up even a few pebbles, the results could be disastrous. Our airstrip and approach areas are currently crumbling, creating an imminent threat of FOD.

But that's not all. The Daily Post was recently informed that one of AVL's most senior air traffic controllers' contract had not been renewed. We don't know whether this is related to the decades-old communications and navigation equipment at the site, or whether it's a separate—and equally troubling—issue. But the combination of a lack of experienced operators and sub-standard equipment is another issue that is worrying, to say the least.

Cap all this with the fact that, if something were to happen at Bauerfield, we would be working with fire safety systems that have been found similarly lacking.

It should never have come to this.

In March last year, as cyclone Pam loomed, the NTDC did the following:

- i. Supported the request to the World Bank to engage the Vanuatu Aviation Investment Program (VAIP);
- ii. Endorsed the option to rehabilitate the Bauerfield airport as short to medium term solution for Vanuatu;
- iii. Noted the progress made towards the rehabilitation of Bauerfield Airport by the Bauerfield Airport Rehabilitation Committee (BARC);
- iv. Agreed that, following final approval of the plan to rehabilitate the Bauerfield Airport, the BARC should endeavour to submit the final plan to the NTDC meeting 2/2015.”

So, after months of due diligence, research and negotiation, with the approval of the Council of Ministers, and the support of the NTDC—and in spite of the massive disruption caused by Pam—the government of Vanuatu recognised the urgency of the work required and kept things moving.

They endorsed a plan with nearly \$60 million in funding under the World Bank's most favourable loan conditions, and got to work.

And then the government changed.

Things unravelled after that. Once again, the AVL board and management changed—and changed again. They chewed up immense time and resources in tit-for-tat litigation. Labour action was threatened. The company's functioning seems to have been reduced to such a level that we've received reports of meetings degrading into tense standoffs. Police have been called—and then recalled.

People who work alongside the company have complained that efforts simply to contact the management there sometimes go for weeks on end, without any response.

And then, to add insult to injury, the product of months and months of continuing work was cast aside. At an Opposition press conference in November last year, Joe Natuman expressed his concern about a decision by the government of Sato Kilman to stop that project.

He stated that when Moana Carcasses was PM, the government had embarked on a controversial \$350 million plan for a Singaporean consortium to build an entirely new airport in rural Efate. Natuman stopped that, and decided instead that an upgrade to the existing tarmac would be a more appropriate response. Once that work was done, Mr Natuman said, he was prepared to reconsider building a new one.

Then, he said, Sato Kilman's government, still deep in the throes of the bribery scandal, and without any formal announcement, decided to cancel the World Bank contract and award the work to a Chinese contractor, reportedly to be funded by the EXIM Bank of China.

The financial terms, Mr Natuman said, are worse in nearly every way: The total debt is more than double, the interest rate is about 4 times as much, and the repayment period is shorter.

In 2013, in a paper that—full disclosure—this writer edited, the Pacific Institute of Public Policy stated, “We need to understand that an EXIM bank's primary role is not to be our friend, but to be the contractor's friend.” And elsewhere, “If development is numbered among its goals, it's China's development, not ours.”

Three different governments, three different plans. That's no way to run a country. Now, for our sins, we are faced with a threat to the safety of our citizens, residents and visitors that is growing daily. But even at this very late date, we still might be able to pull ourselves out. As a matter of national urgency, whoever forms the new government needs to swallow his pride and admit that the World Bank plan, which has advanced further than any other, is our last, best chance to escape financial, and possibly human, disaster.

Why the World Bank plan? Because it's the one we have. It's got warts, sure, but it's the one plan that has the shortest time to completion, and the only one that's survived a proper and public due diligence. This isn't about partisanship; it's about pragmatism.

If we don't do that, then we delay—yet again—any prospect of coming out from under a cloud that quite frankly, could kill people and will crush our economy.

Enough already. We can't let the price of politics get any higher than it already is.