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Page 1 of 2

PM JOINS PUSH FOR PNG FLIGHTS

O'Neill eager to see Port Moresby air link take off

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PAPUA New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill wants Air Niugini flights between Townsville and Port Moresby to take off as soon as possible to promote jobs and investment.

However while the flights appear certain, just when that occurs remains to be seen with Mr O'Neill encouraging his officials to "accelerate" negotiations and Air Niugini saying services can start when market conditions improve.

Mr O'Neill visited the city to attend the funeral of Townsville businessman Sir Mick Curtain, whose Curtain Bros group remains a big player in PNG construction and ports.

Mr O'Neill said there was a lot to be gained from flights to Townsville and he was encouraging PNG officials to accelerate negotiations with Australian civil aviation officials.

"In Queensland we have flights to Cairns and Brisbane, but there is potential in a different way with Townsville that can deliver greater benefits for Papua

New Guinea," he said.

"Townsville is the largest urban centre in Northern Australia and has both existing and a number of new potential linkages with Papua New Guinea.

"Townsville is a business and industry city that has growing importance for trade and investment with Papua New Guinea. We also know there is already a great deal of travel between Townsville and Port Moresby for students studying at James Cook University, and for Defence Force personnel from both countries."

Mr O'Neill said the Townsville flights would initially transit through

Cairns and connect to Port Moresby, which could also provide connections through to Asia.

Asked when flights could begin, Mr O'Neill said: "The sooner we will have Air Niugini flying into Townsville (the better). I wanted it

to happen yesterday."

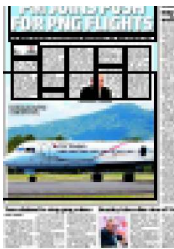
Townsville Airport chief operating officer Kevin Gill said he agreed the links would stimulate jobs, investment and tourism and the airport was very supportive.

"Townsville Airport continues

to believe that Townsville to Port Moresby services will be well supported," Mr Gill said. "The airport looks forward to discussions with Air Niugini as a matter of priority."

Last week Air Niugini CEO Simon Foo said Townsville remained firmly on Air Niugini's radar, once overall PNG/Australia market conditions improved sufficiently to justify opening a second gateway in North Queensland.

Queensland LNP Senator Ian Macdonald said he believed the link would spur trade and make good use of customs services established at Townsville to handle services to Bali.



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Page 2 of 2



BIG BENEFITS: PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill (inset) is eager to see Air Niugini flights between Townsville and Port Moresby.

