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Mrs Jackie Bong Wright
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Your reference

Our reference

Date 25 April 1979

See Mrs Wright.

You asked for some background material about the settlement of Vietnamese refugees in the New Hebrides. Since some confusion appears to surround the question, and the role of Her Majesty's Government and the Government of France, I think it would be useful if I gave you a brief account of recent constitutional developments.

Britain and France have announced their intention to bring the condominium of the New Hebrides to independence in 1980. The territory already exercises a degree of self-government through powers devolved to the Representative Assembly which was elected in November 1977. A Government of National Unity, in which all major political tendencies are represented, was formed in December 1978. The control of immigration is one of the subjects devolved to the Assembly, although decisions by the Assembly on immigration matters are subject to the joint approval of the British and French Resident Commissioners in Vila.

Mr Jimmy Stephens is President of the small Na Griamel political party. In 1975 he proclaimed "independence" for his so-called Na Griamel Federation based on the island of Santo in the north of the archipelago. Maewo is a separate island and lies some 120 Km to the east of Santo. The British, French and New Hebrides Governments do not recognise the claimed independent status of the Federation or the authority of Mr Stephens to speak for other than the members of his own party.

Any proposal relating to the settlement of refugees in the New Hebrides is initially a matter for decision by the lawful New Hebrides Government and Representative Assembly. Since the New Hebrides Chief Minister has publicly disassociated his government from the offer reportedly made by Mr Stephens the question of intervention by either metropolitan government does not arise. Suggestions that they might already have done so, either unilaterally or jointly, are without foundation.

// You might also find useful the enclosed copy of a statement made on 1 March by the New Hebrides Government.

I should be most grateful if you would take the opportunity to correct any misapprehensions among your fellow organisers over the position of the New Hebrides Government on Vietnamese refugees.

Yours sincerely,

S F Howarth

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