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SOLOMON ISLANDS

Senator DEVLIN —Can the Minister representing the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade comment on reports that a number of Australian business people have been expelled from the Solomon Islands? What are the implications of this development for our bilateral relations with the Solomon Islands?

Senator GARETH EVANS —It is the case that 12 Australian business people have been expelled from the Solomons and that threats have been made against Australian High Commission staff. Australia has traditionally had a very warm and friendly relationship with the Solomon Islands, but it is clear that the reputations of Australian business people and of Australian High Commission personnel have been damaged by unfounded allegations about the propriety of their business dealings, including allegations of gold and drug smuggling.

The Mr Smith referred to in Press reports has no connection whatsoever with the Australian Government or, to the best of the Government's knowledge, with any legitimate national or international agency. It is clear that his activities in the Solomon Islands have not assisted Australian interests there or those of the Solomon Islands itself. The Government is confident that the present difficulties will be resolved by continued close consultation with the Solomon Islands Government or, where legal disputes exist, through the appropriate Solomon Islands legal channels.

Certainly the Government has full confidence in the High Commissioner, Mr Gaylard, and his staff. Mr Gaylard has worked competently and effectively to protect legitimate Australian interests and to maintain good relations between Australia and the Solomons in a very difficult set of circumstances engendered in the last few months by a persistent campaign of malicious and defamatory rumour-mongering. The Government respects the right of the Solomon Islands Government to admit or exclude whom it chooses to. We, of course, regret the ban imposed on the Australian journalists and have made our position known to the Solomon Islands Government in that respect.