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PRESS RELEASE

I am pleased to learn about and to accept the return of the 5 human skulls that were repatriated from Sydney in Australia to our National Museum & Art Gallery recently. These skulls come from three (3) provinces in Papua New Guinea notably the East Sepik, Gulf and the Western Province where I come from.

The communities from where these skulls originate obviously had specific ways of decorating them in order to make certain cultural statements. These statements would possibly include values such as courage and heroism, sacrifice and bravery, or they serve as memorable trophies of war and vengeance or even the ultimate possibility of ritual cannibalism where the spirits of victims are absorbed by victors as a means to build up their stock of mystical powers that allow its possessors to influence and dominate others.

I would not want to speculate on the cultural inspirations that have made people to decorate the skulls in the way they have done. Whatever the ceremonial functions of these skulls maybe, their decoration must have easily made the skulls to become objects of curiosity and moral speculation to the eyes and ears of the collectors who found it worthwhile to have collected them in the first place.

Their combined power and allure as objects of cultural curiosity and speculation attracted the initial interests of collectors who extracted these skulls from
villages in PNG and invested them as items of monetary value in the international art market.

In Australia the skulls became part of the estate of an avid collector, Lillian Hoffman, and after her passing a few years ago the skulls were offered for sale in the Sydney art market. It remains a curiosity as to how cultural elaborations to parts of our human remains suddenly become endowed with a value for transaction as commodity items in the art market.

As a lawmaker, I am glad to note that there are laws in Australia that prohibit the traffic and sale of human remains. I want to congratulate their various government authorities that have restrained and withdrew these skulls from being further categorised and licensed as curiosities in the auction halls of the art market in Sydney.

I specifically want to congratulate the Board of Trustees of the PNG National Museum & Art Gallery in negotiating and arranging the repatriation of these remains back here to Port Moresby. Their safe passage and arrival has also been facilitated by PNG Customs for which we are grateful to their assistance.

What is also commendable is the support of academics and museum colleagues in Sydney who shared with us the moral concerns and anxieties over the traffic and sale of human remains. For this we want to thank Dr Jude Philip of the Sydney University MacLeay Museum and Dr Robbin Torrence of the Australian Museum for making possible the repatriation of these crania to our National Museum & Art Gallery.

We do not know the identities and specific details about the origins or provenance of these crania. We do not know how the people or communities from where these skulls come from would receive them at this point in time where memories of the individuals who animate these skulls have been effaced in the passage of time since their decimation. Nonetheless, we are grateful that these skulls have now found a resting place in our National Museum.
It may seem curious that in absorbing the skulls into our national collections of treasures we would transform our Museum into a philosophical grave and a cemetry of memorabilia. For us however, I believe that in accepting and absorbing these skulls we feel animated and edified with an acute sense of resurgence. Animation reverses the apparent stasis of museum displays and signal that our national collections are coming to life and rejuvenation.

As the Minister responsible for our cultural heritage, I welcome the return of these skulls to our Museum. In other countries, where there are competing versions of sovereignties, such as in Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada, we find that the presence of human remains both in art markets and in museums have provided a particular avenue for suppressed minorities to assert their sense of cultural identity and sovereignties. Such claims are not pronounced here in PNG with the same kind of moral force and persuasion.

Rather I take the return of these skulls to make a wider claim for repatriation of other cultural and biological remains held in overseas museums to come back home to our Museum. This is a call especially for those material that have been stolen and removed illegally from PNG. I would task the Board of Trustees to take up the issue of repatriation with a method and policy. At the same time I am aware that we can only bring back such material if and only if we have the appropriate storerooms and educational programs to look after and manage our national cultural treasures. I would endeavour to give every support that our National Museum & Art Gallery and other sister organisations including the National Cultural Commission, and Tourism Promotion Authority are given consideration in our stride towards economic growth and development alongside cultural stability. Thank you all for coming to witness this occasion.

Hon Boka Kondra MP
Minister for Tourism, Arts & Culture

NOTE: For further information please contact Dr Andrew Moutu or Mr Vincent Pou at the National Museum on ph 325 5364 or fax 325 1779