

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,

SIR ROBERT MENZIES, IN LONDON, ON 19TH JUNE, 1965

PRIME MINISTER : In view of what has appeared in the Press here, I thought I ought to say something about the suggestion by Nkrumah about the withdrawal of the Australian Forces. I think I ought to say right away that I do not propose to quote what other people say in the Conference. I think this is not right. In fact there is a general rule, which is sometimes broken, to that effect. But where a statement is made which affects my position, what I have said or what I have done, then I regard myself at liberty to say something, and on this occasion what Dr. Nkrumah put forward was given publicity by his delegation presumably, and it is very important therefore to note what it was that he put forward.

He said he thought that Australia and New Zealand could make a magnanimous gesture by withdrawing, in the case of Australia, the troops already in South Vietnam, and delaying the despatch, in the case of New Zealand, of the artillery unit that they are proposing to send. He also said that an appeal should be made to the United States to terminate bombing in North Vietnam.

Now you will not fail to notice that these are all proposals for the weakening of the Military position of what I will call "our side". There was no suggestion that any appeal be made to North Vietnam to refrain from reinforcing or supplying, and no appeal to the Viet Cong to cease fire, nothing of that kind. This was purely a one-sided proposal and as such I dealt with it.

What I said in substance and almost in terms, I think, was that these two proposals were calculated to weaken the position of South Vietnam and the forces defending South Vietnam and correspondingly to strengthen the position of the enemy, without any concession being made by the enemy at all, and such a proposition I was not prepared to accept for one minute, and I therefore rejected it and quite rightly.

I would just like to make it clear, if it needs to be made clear, that if this mission succeeds in establishing some basis for negotiation, some basis for a conference, and manages to secure as part of that a general cease-fire on the part of all elements, that of course would be a very different matter, and one which naturally we as one of the sponsors of this mission would welcome.

There is one other aspect of this conference which I think I should mention, and it's this. As I think I pointed out last year when I got back to Australia, there is a new vocabulary arising in these meetings. People use words in different senses. Now we are, of course, treated and defined by others as being committed while they themselves say they are uncommitted. This is a subtlety which needs a little study.

What is meant, I gather, after two days, is that you are committed if you either publicly support the action of the United States or publicly participate in the defence of South Vietnam, but you are uncommitted if you confine your support of China or Hanoi to words. This is a distinction of immense subtlety. It has to be borne in mind because, really, to be accused of being committed, which in my case is an honourable crime, by someone who is equally committed on the other side, seems to me a little odd. Now I wanted to say that because there is a lot of distortion going on in some of the columns here in London.

PRIME MINISTER : What I now say will be increasingly true in (Contd.) future years as the numbers of those present grow. This year we have twenty-one Prime Ministers. We have, I suppose, fifteen topics that will need to be discussed and if everybody wants to make a speech on each, that will be three hundred speeches and of course that horse won't gallop. In the old days, everybody could speak on everything but it can't be done today.

For example, yesterday we were surveying political problems of the world and we were dealing in particular with the general survey of Africa. Well, it is the African Prime Ministers who speak, and by the time that they've spoken, (I am not saying they spoke at any undue length; it was very informative and interesting) but by the time they have finished, time's up, you might say, and this is going to happen more and more. So that more and more there will be views expressed that will not be argued out in the conference. Nobody other than an African spoke on the African problem. None of the rest of us spoke, nor I suppose ever will, until we come to the communique to see what goes in. This is no complaint. It is inevitable. This is a phenomenon we will all have to take notice of in the Prime Ministers' meetings.

I am sure we will have to devise some ways and means of restricting either the length of statements or the repetition of arguments already put, which will enable both sides to be stated where there are two sides to the question. It is going to be a bigger problem as time goes on.

There is another matter connected with the Australia position on these discussions. Nothing has been said so far to detract from the position of Malaysia, and I am hoping we shall come out of this conference with another declaration in support of Malaysia like the one we had last time, and so far I haven't heard anything that would suggest that we cannot. But one view we take very strongly is that you cannot treat Vietnam in isolation because manifestly if the Communists overran South Vietnam and the whole position was lost, there would be imminent danger to Laos, to Thailand, and I would think certainly to Malaysia, which is already of course occupied on one front. Therefore we have treated the problems of South-East Asia as a whole, saying you cannot break them up into fragments, and what would normally be our resoluteness of mind about South Vietnam is strengthened because to us South Vietnam is part of a pattern and it is in relation to the whole area that we see the overall threat and the overall need for resistance.

One further point I would like to make about the mission is this. I did not expect Mr. Senanayake would be able to join it because the very reason which prevented him from coming to this conference would obviously prevent him from going on a mission of this kind which might take some time. His Budget comes in a month earlier than ours and as you know, he has a difficult series of problems, financially and economically, in his own country. Certainly his absence or unwillingness to join this mission is not to be treated as a criticism of the setting-up of the mission and on the contrary, Ceylon made it quite clear that it favoured this view, this action, as indeed most of us did.

We do not take votes, but clearly there was a substantial consensus of support for the Wilson proposal.

QUESTION : Can you clarify for us the New Zealand angle?

P.M. : No, I can't. The Prime Minister of New Zealand is here. He is of age. He can speak for himself.

Q. I would have regarded Australia as one of the Governments principally concerned in South Vietnam. I just wondered what action the mission was going to take to sound out your own views on the basis for a negotiation.

P.M. Well, we haven't been treated as a party principal and I must say that the mission proposes to approach the United States and I would anticipate it would visit Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, Saigon, Washington, and it will maintain contact in one way or another with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, but it had not occurred to me that it needed to come to Canberra, to ask me what my views were.

Q. Could you give us the basic principles on which a settlement could be reached. You mentioned a cease-fire, but could you take it from there?

P.M. We, ourselves, have always believed that if there is to be a cease-fire it must be all round and reciprocal. In other words, if there is to be a cease-fire on the part of the South Vietnamese and the Americans and the Australians, whoever is there, then there must equally be a cease-fire on the side of the Viet Cong, however one can get at them or identify them. A cessation of reinforcement or maintenance of any kind from North Vietnam, a cessation of aggressive conduct on the part of North Vietnam - in other words, a full respect for the territorial integrity and political independence of South Vietnam - and that nothing should be left which would involve South Vietnam after an armistice in being left to the mercy of the Communist groups in the Viet Cong. In the long run, what we want is an independent South Vietnam, living in peace, able to conduct relations in an atmosphere of peace, able therefore to establish a democratically-elected government with some probability of stability and with some assurances, however they may be obtained or guaranteed, that she be left alone to live her own life.

Q. Do you see any possibility of the removal of the division between North and South Vietnam?

P.M. I would not have thought so in my time, not that I am blaming myself for it, but I am stating it as a chronological proposition.

Q. Inaudible.

P.M. Don't get this out of proportion. Australia is not under criticism. What Ghana did was to say "I would like to make a suggestion." He said, "I make this humbly and I suggest to my friends that they might help." I don't call that an attack. I had to reject the suggestion, that is all.

Q. In your opening presentation, you used the word that the two proposals made by Ghana were "calculated" to weaken the position in South Vietnam. Do you use the word "calculate" in its strict sense?

P.M. No, I don't mean "designed". Oh no. I am prepared to assume this would have the effect of..... I am glad you raised that point. I am not challenging the bona fides of the suggestion by Nkrumah. All I challenged instantly was the effect that it would have.

Q. Has Australia ever had in a conference like this a direct request like this to do something externally?

P.M. No, not in my time, but perhaps this is the only time when the circumstances might give rise to it, because we do have forces there.

Q. Do you hold out at this time much hope for the success of the mission, in view of the differences of opinion we have had so far.

P.M. I don't know that I will want to say very much on that. I think it has some hope of success, but for us to speculate about it and sort of begin to lay the odds, I think might have no good result. I think it is a very good thing to have this mission, that this is a very well worthwhile exercise. Those who might think this might operate to the disadvantage of China can think so only on the footing that they believe that China will not call it off. That will be for China to decide or for Hanoi to decide.

Q. How much do you feel that Mr. Wilson's suggestion might help him with his own political troubles in Britain?

P.M. I wouldn't make any such suggestion. I think that is a good cynical view, but it is not mine. Mr. Wilson discussed this notion of his with me at great length before he produced it. I happened to be the senior Prime Minister and I happened to be in a place where he was and therefore there was a chance to talk and he took me into his confidence in this matter and we discussed it and tossed it around and I think from everybody's point of view it is a jolly good proposal and well worth pursuing.

Q. When did he make you aware of this proposal first?

P.M. I think it was the night before. This was a highly secret proposal. Yes, I heard about it within twenty-four hours of the announcement.

Q. As far as you are aware, had he made any proposal of this kind to President Johnson while you were there last week in this respect?

P.M. I don't think so.

Q. If the mission succeeded in obtaining a real cease-fire, these are circumstances in which you might then consider the withdrawal of the Australian troops?

Q. Well, we would then consider the position as the Americans would. We would not be likely to withdraw while they remained because we're there with them and for a common purpose.

Q. Have you had any discussions with President Nkrumah outside the conference?

P.M. No. We haven't had much chance to have any private discussions with anybody since it began. I am going to Chequers tonight. There are bound to be one or two Prime Ministers there, and Dorneywood tomorrow night, and I suppose there will be more there.

Q. Do you think there's a possibility that the Commonwealth will become so cumbersome that it will cease to make any worthwhile contribution in the future?

P.M. I'd sooner not answer that. I'm a little - what's this modern word? - I'm a little unclear in my mind.

Q. There is no question, as far as you know, of Ghana's membership in the mission being dependent upon Australia's withdrawal.....

P.M. Oh dear no. No suggestion of it. I'm afraid one or two of you may still be under the impression that this was a sort of demand. It was put up as a suggestion. This was done when we resumed yesterday. He even said that he made it with due humility, and it was never at any time associated with Ghana's membership of the mission.

Q. He didn't raise it on the first day?

P.M. No. This was the first and only time this proposal was made.

Q. In other words, this came as a kind of second thought?

P.M. I don't know whether it was a second thought or a third thought. All I can say is the simple fact that he mentioned it when we resumed our conference yesterday morning. At the conclusion of the conference, the Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Hasluck, said, "Might I make one point on this question of why should the mission not visit Australia? The thought in Mr. Wilson's mind, you will recall at the outset, was the Mission would go to those powers who have it within their competence to stop hostilities if they wish to do so." For the same reason I think it unlikely that they'll need to visit London.
