

ASIAN TOUR 1967

KOREA

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. HAROLD HOLT AT SEOUL

9TH APRIL, 1967

I am nearing the end now of this journey I have been making to four countries in the Asian region - first to Cambodia, then Laos, Taiwan and finally Korea, with stopover visits to Singapore and Hong Kong where I have been able to have some talks with officials and members of governments in those places also.

It has been for me a most informative, interesting and indeed enthralling journey. I shall return to my own country very much better informed about the countries and peoples I have visited and I hope that since this involves me as Head of my Government, the effect will be valuable in the Cabinet discussions and parliamentary discussions in which I shall be participating from now on.

But there is one over-riding impression that I should like to pass on to you and it is the feeling of warmth, of friendship wherever we have gone. These countries differ in size, in history and tradition, in circumstance, in their foreign policies some of them, but wherever we went as representatives of the Australian Government and people, we were greeted with the warmest of friendship. I did not see a hostile banner, hear a hostile voice, nor see a hostile look in any one of the countries we visited at any of the time we were amongst their people, and nowhere has this warmth of friendliness been more evident than in your own country of Korea.

It was immediately apparent when we arrived and were greeted by those wonderful crowds which turned out to give a welcome to an Australian Prime Minister and his party and it has been evident wherever we have moved since. Quite obviously the comradeship which built up between our two countries in the period of conflict earlier, has laid a basis for an enduring friendship. Our co-operation in Viet Nam, in such gatherings as the Manila Conference, ASPAC and other institutions and meetings where we are able to develop together our common interests in this area of the world, have promoted that friendship.

I am sure that with my own visit, the contact that I have had with your distinguished President, Prime Minister, Members of your Government, senior members of your community, your university and students, people that I have met as I have moved around - all this will have given fresh warmth to that friendship and will have deepened it - I hope for all time to come.

So I feel tremendously gratified at the experience I have had throughout the journey, particularly here in Korea. I shall return to my country feeling that this has been a most rewarding, informative, valuable journey and with friendships strengthened that will, I hope, endure for the benefit of the countries visited and certainly for my own.

Now I would like to make some time available to you to put whatever questions you would wish to me. This will be our only opportunity together of speaking quite frankly to each other so please do not hesitate to put the questions you would like to ask.

Q. Press reports have been optimistic lately concerning the war in Viet Nam. They say the communists are desperate and are looking for a face-saving way to the negotiating table. Do you think Hanoi is desperate? And if so, do you think unilateral action on the part of the U.S., for example, suspension of the bombing of North Viet Nam, will accomplish anything? Goldwater said all fighting must stop on both sides before we can accomplish anything.

PM: Well, I am in no position to say whether the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese are desperate or not. I do believe, on all the evidence which has reached me that they have suffered very heavy reverses. The high jump in defection rate had a special significance and I believe that their losses are cumulative. They are taking a great deal of punishment, but so far there has been no overt indication of a disposition on the part of Hanoi to seek an early end to the hostilities. There is one school of thought which believes they are determined to hang on, encouraged perhaps by some comment which has come out of the United States. In particular, believing that the 1968 Presidential elections might produce a better atmosphere for them. . . . I think that they are mistaken in their belief. I am sure that the American people generally want to see the conflict through to a just and enduring peace but I can't say or add to the information which I think is already well known to most of you that these negotiations have been sought through a number of channels. There has been an indication first given in concerted form from the Manila Conference and before that there were, of course, individual approaches. The efforts of Di Thart and others, the suspension of bombing through the truce period all have been directed to the encouragement of peace negotiations. But I have no confidence myself that an indefinite suspension of bombing would produce an atmosphere for negotiations. When it has been tried previously, all that it has done is enabled the North Vietnamese to build up their supplies and military strength. They have taken advantage of it to improve their military position and in the absence of any clear reciprocity, namely, an indication of the willingness to enter into negotiations in good faith, I don't see any advantage from a suspension of the bombing at this time.

Q. What does Your Excellency think is the best co-operation between Korea and Australia?

PM: Well, already that co-operation has been evident first in the assistance we were able to bring to your people and your forces in their time of need in the crisis of the 1950's, and now there has been the co-operation we have had together assisting the South Vietnamese to resist the communist aggression with which they are contending. We are co-operating for peaceful purposes and for constructive purposes in such institutions that I have mentioned such as ASPAC, the Asian Development Bank, and other avenues. I am encouraged to believe that from my visit today to Ulsan and the talks I was able to have with your Deputy Prime Minister that there will be a growing trade between our two countries. He spoke in particular of your intention to establish an iron and steel industry in this country which would be likely to require iron ore from Australia and of your growing requirement for plywood which would be devoted to the making of furniture and other purposes. In these and other directions, we can look, I think optimistically, to a growing trade relationship between the two countries and I would hope that arising out of my own visit and return visits which leaders from your own country will, I hope, be making to Australia, there will be a closer relationship leading to useful collaboration in areas of security, of diplomatic collaboration and of growing trade.

Q. Reports from Saigon today indicate that the Allied side had proposed to North Viet Nam for a cease-fire on the occasion of the Buddhist birthday anniversary next month. Do you think, Mr. Prime Minister, that this could lead up to a basis for cease-fire negotiations for enduring peace?

PM: I have not heard of such a proposal. . . . but this is not a prospect about which I feel optimistic.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister does your Government consider a possibility of sending more troops to Viet Nam in an effort to bring North Viet Nam to the negotiating table?

PM: Our troops are in Viet Nam at the invitation of the Government of South Viet Nam and as requests are received, of course, they are considered. But it is well known by the Government of South Viet Nam that Australia has commitments in other directions as well and that Australia is also at this time trying to build up the strength of its own Regular Army, which involves the use of many regular troops for instruction purposes. We do also have, for example, forces stationed in Malaya as part of our commitment in that area of the world with the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve and, in addition we have, of course, to assume a responsibility in respect of Papua and New Guinea and our own home defence so there is not at present time any proposal before the Government for increasing the size of its forces. The latest increases have more than doubled the strength which existed not so very long ago. I may say we have doubled the provision for defence over the last four years and this now represents somewhere between 4 to 5 per cent. of the gross national product.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, what do you think, in your opinion, the allied troops in Viet Nam should do to win the war or to bring the war to an early close? Do you favour the escalation, including bombing of the north, or do you favour descalation?

PM: I think these are matters which rest largely on the military judgment of the people who lead the forces there and I think one can take up from the results which are now being achieved that the military forces are operating very effectively. I believe very effectively indeed. I would not assume myself the responsibility for urging any particular type of military activity. I think that in my judgment, this is largely a matter on which one must rest on the advice of our military experts.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, we heard of your rejection of the peace proposal suggested by U Thant. Do you have any ideas for a settlement of the war in Viet Nam? If not, what do you think is the best way for early peace in Viet Nam?

PM: I thought we had made that clear in our Joint Declaration at Manila. We indicated there the circumstances which we felt just and reasonable. The criticism I had to offer in it was not directed to Secretary U Thant or his very well meaning efforts to bring this unhappy business to a conclusion but I felt that to suspend the bombing without any reciprocity on the other side was, having regard to our earlier experience, not a realistic way for us to secure the negotiations we were seeking.

Q. Yesterday, you had discussions with Prime Minister Chung about trade relations between Korea and Australia. Have you arrived at any concrete agreement? Please tell us.

PM: There was not much opportunity yesterday to talk on economic matters for my talks with the Prime Minister were occupied mainly in discussions on the Viet Nam issue, as they were later with President Park. I was interested to have an assessment of the developments in China and our time was largely taken up with these matters, but in the course of today's travel, during which I spent a good deal of the time with the Deputy Prime Minister, we have discussed a variety of economic matters.

I have already indicated the possibilities of increasing trade which there seems to be in the future, but we were not conducting negotiation on a trade agreement or anything of that sort. He did tell me that an economic mission would be going to Australia with a view to examining various possibilities there and no doubt holding discussions with the appropriate people in our trade departments.

Q. Do you have any plan to make ASPAC go rather swinging?

PM: Well, I certainly hope that ASPAC will develop in usefulness but I am not in a position to indicate any special direction at this time. My Foreign Minister would have been giving his personal attention to this and he will be meeting representatives of your own Government at the meeting of representatives of friendly forces in Washington, as indeed no doubt they will have met at ECAFE also. He left Australia shortly before I did and I do not know what account he has to give of these discussions, but we have welcomed the formation of ASPAC and so far as we are concerned we shall be doing what we can to make it a worthwhile corporation.

Q. In Hong Kong and Taipei you were asked questions about Australia's immigration control and in your reply you pointed out that there had been considerable liberalisation during the past twenty years and the Australian Government policy was understood by the Asian Governments. In the light of this would you comment on charges by one of your Government colleagues the other day that Australia's controls were highly discriminatory. He put forward the proposal that Asia should go out and join. (rest of question indistinct)

PM: Well, I have not seen any text of any such proposal and indeed, if there are people of Asian extraction who become naturalised Australians, they are eligible to join the forces for National Service legislation now applies to aliens as well, as you would know. But it may be of interest seeing that I did make a statement when this question was first put to me, that it occupies a greater prominence in the minds of the pressmen than of the Governments who are, I think, well understanding of the reasons for policy and who, in their own countries, administer policy relating to immigration from other countries, that not one government representative has raised this matter with me in any of the four countries that I have visited.

Can I just add, for the information of our Korean friends here, some of the details which I gave to a question relating to immigration policy when it was asked earlier at the two places Mr. Ramsey has mentioned. Since the war, some 30,000 people have been admitted to Australia who would not have been eligible for admission under the rules which previously applied. He spoke of some liberalisation of our

(MR. HOLT Contd.) immigration policy. More than 6,000 have qualified for full naturalisation and early in my own term as Prime Minister, I brought the period of qualification of naturalisation for Asian citizens into line with that which applies to those residents of Australia from other countries as well. There are also currently in Australia some 12,000 students from various countries of Asia in our colleges and universities and I am certain that if any of you have the opportunity to come to Australia or to visit Australia you will be agreeably surprised not only at the degree of friendship shown to you but the absence of any discrimination practised against people of any other race from our own.

Q. At the conference yesterday with Prime Minister Chung, were there any discussions on assistance to reconstruction in Viet Nam? If there were any please point out something concrete and also was there any discussion about additional troop despatch from Korea to Viet Nam?

PM: I think you will appreciate that it is not appropriate for me to give details of confidential discussions which were held between us, but as to the first part of your question, I can just put the answer quite broadly. Our forces there are engaged in work of civic action and there is, on Australia's part, as I have no doubt there is on the part of Korea also, aid given in addition to the work of civic action by the armed forces. I have no doubt that if we could secure a peace settlement that there would be a good deal of reconstruction to be carried out in South Viet Nam and Australia would hold itself willing, as no doubt Korea would also, to give assistance in the work of peace just as we have felt glad to give assistance to meet the crisis of war.

As to the reference to troops from Korea, that matter was not raised by me and any announcement which your own Government has to make on this matter would come appropriately from them.
