

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

VIETNAM: STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT OF UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 2 April 1968]

Mr GORTON (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—Yesterday at noon, Australian eastern time, the President of the United States announced decisions lately taken concerning the war in Vietnam. Those decisions were, firstly, to build up the South Vietnamese armed forces to a planned target of 800,000 men—an increase of 135,000—and to re-equip those augmented forces with more modern equipment from the United States; secondly, to maintain the United States forces at the level of approximately 525,000 men, which is the level of the United States forces in South Vietnam now, and to dispatch some ancillary troops to service troops which had recently been flown to South Vietnam; thirdly, to renew a resolve to continue the military struggle in South Vietnam until such time as a just and lasting peace could be worked out in that country; and, fourthly, to cease or halt aerial and naval bombardment over a major part of North Vietnam in the hope that such cessation might lead to the beginning of talks designed to secure such a just peace. I made a public statement on that matter, but I feel that I should repeat it here in the House before expanding upon it. The statement that I made is as follows:

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The statement—

I am referring, of course, to the statement made by President Johnson:

... re-emphasises two important aspects of the approach of the United States.

One is that the United States is firmly resolved to continue the military struggle to the point where it becomes recognised that talks designed to secure a just and lasting peace must take place.

The other is that the United States is prepared now, as it has been prepared in the past, to enter into such talks at once, and is prepared to make concessions in an effort to bring about such talks. The Australian Government has repeatedly indicated that it would support peace negotiations provided they held promise of leading to a just and lasting peace which effectively safeguards the security and freedom of choice of the people of South Vietnam.

The Australian Government regards this initiative by the American President as a further and significant exhibition of willingness on the part of the United States of America to engage in talks aimed at that end. The halting of bombing over most of North Vietnam, without insistence on an indication from Hanoi of a willingness to negotiate or of a reciprocal cessation of military build-up by North Vietnam, will test the willingness of Hanoi to enter into discussions aimed at a peaceful settlement of a genuine kind. We must all hope that this response by Hanoi is forthcoming quickly.

At the same time, the continuation of bombing in the area to the north of the battlefields will

continue to hamper the flow of troops and war material from north to south and will not leave allied troops at too great a military disadvantage.

I now propose to expand somewhat upon that statement of the Government's attitude.

The decision by the President to halt the bombing of the larger part of North Vietnam—a part where 90% of the population lives and works—naturally has attracted world attention. I say 'naturally' because of the recent suggestions made in many quarters, and supported, I understand, by U Thant, that if the United States halted its bombing of controlled and selected targets in that area, the North Vietnamese would be prepared to enter into discussions aimed at securing a just, lasting and genuine peace for the South Vietnamese. I say 'naturally' also because against that background this gesture by the United States, giving up as it does a military advantage, is the most significant and generous gesture yet made in the hope of starting such negotiations.

It is, Mr Speaker, an extension of the offer made by the President of the United States at San Antonio last September when he publicly offered to halt the bombing of North Vietnam as soon as the North Vietnamese had indicated that such a halt would lead promptly to productive discussions. That offer was rejected by Hanoi. Now, the President has gone the second mile. Instead of saying: 'Give us an indication that you will begin peace talks and we will then halt bombing', the President is saying: 'We will now halt the bombing and ask you in return to respond by beginning negotiations'. This will provide, I think, an acid test of whether Hanoi has any genuine wish to enter into peaceful negotiations or not. We all hope they will and that Britain and the Soviet Union, to whom my Government has sent messages supporting President Johnson's appeal, will use their best efforts to see that they do.

At the same time it is important to realise that not all bombing has been halted. In those areas contiguous to the battlefields in North and South Vietnam, those areas where North Vietnamese troops and munitions of war gather and flow towards the south, the continuation of bombardment to hamper, hinder and reduce this flow will continue. Reinforcement of men and supplies will not be stopped by this. But if even a quarter of the troops destined for the

South are disabled, if even a quarter of the mortar bombs, missiles and artillery shells are destroyed before they can wreak their destruction in the South, if the time taken to transport supplies is doubled, then great assistance will have been given to Allied troops in the South and casualties among Allied troops which otherwise would have been incurred will not be incurred. That is why the President said:

. . . I cannot in conscience stop all bombing so long as to do so would immediately and directly endanger the lives of our men and our allies.

I imagine there would be few Australians who would not agree with him. We for our part have consistently made it clear that we believe that there is a military advantage in the bombing of controlled and selected targets of military significance in North Vietnam. We have as consistently made it clear that we supported the concept of halting such bombing when the North Vietnamese were prepared to enter into peace talks, subject to the military build-up in the South by the North Vietnamese not continuing because of the bombing halt. These latest proposals which continue to offer protection and support to Allied troops in the northern battlefields but which deliberately forgo the military advantage of more widespread bombing in the hope of securing the beginning of peace talks, also have our support and we hope they will be successful, for we in Australia seek, as was stated in the Governor-General's Speech at the beginning of this Parliament:

. . . neither the destruction of North Vietnam, nor the overthrow of the Government of North Vietnam but merely the cessation of aggression against the people of South Vietnam so that those people may, by the exercise of a franchise they have shown they know how to exercise even under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances, choose their own form of Government. We seek a just and lasting peace based on these objectives. We have supported and will support every effort for negotiation of such a peace.

This latest initiative is an effort to begin such negotiations for such a peace. We hope, and I think all Australians hope, that this objective will be attained. It is now for Hanoi to respond and to show whether this peace initiative will or will not be rebuffed, whether this significant concession will or will not be ignored, whether the war will continue at its present tempo or whether, if progress is made in peace talks, it may abate. But we should not lose sight

in discussing this phase of the President's statement of that reiteration in it of a firm resolve, should peace initiatives of this kind be rebuffed, to continue the struggle until it is clear to those who are aggressors that there will have to be talks which will lead to a true peace and not to something which the President described as a fake peace. We for our part are ready to stand with our allies, as we have in the war's prosecution. We are ready to support our allies as we have in actions designed to seek talks

to secure a true peace. It is our hope that this latest initiative may be accepted and that those people in South Vietnam may, through it, gain those rights of self determination for the preservation of which this war began and for the restoration and preservation of which the President's statement indicates that this war will, if necessary, be continued, but which, as a result of the initiative he has taken, offers a hope of peace talks attaining this objective without further loss of life.