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COMMONWEALTH PRIME MINISTERS' CONFERENCE

Statement by the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. John Gorton

It is significant that the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference of the seventies is taking place in South-East Asia.

As the first Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting ever held in this part of the world, it should lead to a better understanding of the problems and aspirations of those Commonwealth members who live in the Asian and Pacific regions.

It is also appropriate that the Leaders of the Commonwealth - a multi-racial organisation whose members have inherited democratic traditions - should meet in Singapore, a country which has made a sustained and admirable effort to build a multi-racial, democratic society.

This meeting is being held in the centre of the area in which Australia is situated; the area in which we are seeking to play a constructive role directed towards the evolution of a peaceful, progressive and stable Asian region in which we desire to play a co-operative part.

I hope that this Asian setting will give an Asian focus to this meeting and enable us to have full and useful discussions of the complex and important situation in this part of the world. The continuing search for a just and durable peace in Vietnam, which will permit the people of the South to determine in peace their own form of government, and the related quest for security from communist aggression in Cambodia and Laos are among the Asian issues which the meeting might usefully consider.

I hope also that this meeting will cover a wide range of matters of importance and not become too involved in any particular issue. Naturally, Asian countries tend to be preoccupied with Asian problems, African countries with African problems, and the countries of the Caribbean with Caribbean problems. This is natural. But I hope too that we can also deal with the broad political issues of the day, which affect us all, such as the quest for security and stability.

While Heads of Commonwealth Governments will be meeting at a time when the Commonwealth is under some strain, it has proved a flexible and durable organization and I hope its cohesion can be preserved.

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This is the second Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting I have attended. Successive Australian Governments have attached importance to the Commonwealth. So does my Government.

Naturally, we see the development in the Asian and Pacific region of a peaceful community of stable, developing nations as an objective of primary importance for us. But we take a wider view. The Commonwealth provides a forum for wide-ranging and valuable contacts with other leaders.

We see the Commonwealth as a free, multi-racial association of 32 countries representing about one quarter of the world's population; a forum with a common language, larger than it was but still more intimate and manageable in size than the United Nations and more broadly based than regional organisations. We see a continuing value in such an association exchanging ideas and discussing problems of common interest without intruding into each other's domestic policies, or seeking to dictate courses of action to any member.

SINGAPORE : 12 January 1971

(This statement is released in Singapore to coincide with the arrival of the Australian Prime Minister).