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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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STATEMENT TO THE PARLIAMENT ON THE SINAI PEACEKEEPING FORCE

I wish to announce today to Honourable Members the Australian Government's decision on the question of Australia's participation in the proposed Sinai peacekeeping force.

In doing so, I want to set that proposal against the background of the history of the Middle East over the last thirty years, for it is only against that background that the importance of the proposal can be judged and the decision relating to it understood.

Over the last three decades the Middle East has been the most unstable region in the world. This instability has had many causes, but what has given it special character has been the conflict between Israel and the Arab states. This has generated more bitterness, more hatred, more suspicion than any other conflict in the world during this period.

Four times in one generation it led to war: in 1948 immediately after the creation of Israel; in 1956 during the Suez crisis; in 1967 and again in 1973. These wars not only disrupted the region itself, but threatened the peace of the world.

As well as war, the conflict caused a terrible refugee problem, fed fanaticism and terror, and distorted and warped the lives of the countries involved. By the mid-1970's for example, Israel found it necessary to spend 36% of its GNP on defence, with crippling results for its economy.

All efforts to end the conflict, and there were very many, failed in the face of accumulated suspicion and hostility. The differences appeared irreconcilable. Then, in November 1977, the nearest thing to a political miracle in our time occurred.

In an extraordinary act of political courage and vision, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt flew to Jerusalem and addressed the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament. This single dramatic act created a new situation overnight. It set in train a process of negotiation between Egypt and Israel, with the United States closely involved.

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Within a year, this had culminated in the Camp David Accords of September 1978, and, in another few months, it resulted in the Egypt-Israeli peace treaty of March 1979.

These events were generally welcomed as an historic breakthrough. It was not a matter of believing that all problems were solved, for clearly there was a long hard road ahead and the principal actors would need not only great determination and skill, but all the support they could get from the international community, if they were to complete the journey. But the problems no longer appeared utterly intractable and a willingness to contemplate compromise had replaced complete dependence on solution by the gun.

The Camp David Accords and the peace treaty contained two essential elements. One dealt with the procedures for implementing "full autonomy" for the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza after the establishment of an elected self-governing authority. The other dealt with the bilateral aspects of the peace treaty and, specifically, with the return to Egypt of the territory occupied by Israel in the Sinai Peninsula during the earlier fighting.

Several things need to be noted about these two parts. First, they are not separate and discrete but interconnected, two parts of a total and very carefully negotiated package. In particular, progress on the future of the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza depends on maintaining confidence at the bilateral level between Israel and Egypt, and this in turn depends on the completion of the return of the occupied territories of the Sinai to Egypt.

Second, the future attitude of the other Arab states to the Accords is likely to depend very substantially on the successful carrying out of the Accords as they relate to the Sinai. If the current reservations and suspicion of the Arab states are to diminish, it is essential that they be carried out.

Thirdly, both elements of the peace process require substantial political and strategic concessions by Israel. These were agreed to by Israel in return for an agreement on a satisfactory set of arrangements to guarantee its security. It is here that the peacekeeping force assumes prominence.

On the basis of the confidence established at Camp David, Israel has already withdrawn from approximately two-thirds of the Sinai and, given the history of the relationship between the two countries, that it has done so had been remarkable. It is scheduled to have withdrawn completely from the Peninsula by the end of April 1982. But, as the text of the treaty makes clear, that complete withdrawal is conditional on the existence of a peacekeeping force which will supervise both the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and the implementation of the security arrangements agreed on in the treaty.

The existence of an effective peacekeeping force in the Sinai, one which would by its presence secure Israel's southern flank, is therefore a necessary condition for total withdrawal. It would also help to create the kind of confidence required for progress to be made with respect to the West Bank and Gaza.

The existence of such a force would not guarantee success - nothing can do that. But without it there can be little hope. The peace force that was envisaged in the treaty was a United Nations force. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to bring that into being.

The Soviet Union, which has consistently opposed the Camp David Accords and which vetoed the extension of the mandate of the U.N. emergency force, stands as an insurmountable obstacle to its creation. The Soviet Union has consistently adopted an obstructionist approach to the search for a Middle East peace, has sought to encourage and take advantage of instability and to position itself to make strategic gains.

The question has been, therefore, whether faced with the Soviet veto, there should be no force at all - with the disastrous consequences that would entail in the whole peace process - or whether there should be an international peacekeeping force outside the United Nations system. In considering that question it should be noted that the likelihood of a Soviet veto was anticipated at the time of the signing of the treaty.

In letters to both President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin, President Carter undertook that, "if the Security Council fails to establish and maintain the arrangements called for in the treaty, the President will be prepared to take those steps necessary to ensure the establishment and maintenance of an acceptable alternative multinational force". That letter and the assurance it gave were an integral component of the agreement reached by Egypt and Israel in 1979.

The Australian Government believes that while it would have been preferable for the Sinai peacekeeping force to be established under a United Nations mandate - If that is ruled out by the position taken by the Soviet Union - then in terms of what is at stake, in terms of peace in this highly sensitive region, it is infinitely preferable that there should be an international peacekeeping force created outside United Nations auspices than that the whole peace process should be frustrated by the absence of any force at all.

Let me add that we should be careful, in a situation where it is possible to take significant initiatives for peace, before we circumscribe them by establishing circumstances in which the Soviet Union would gain a permanent capacity to interpose a veto, for that might give to the Soviet Union a greater power than it could manage on its own account to thwart and frustrate progress towards peace.

Granted that the need for a peacekeeping force to support the continuation of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty is accepted the question remains as to whether Australia itself should participate in such a force.

No-one would pretend that this is an easy question to answer and this Government has deliberated long and hard over it.

I make no apology at all for the time we have taken in coming to a decision. There are considerations which weigh for and against participation, and these were set out in the statement to this House by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 26 May.

A number of major arguments point in the direction of participation. Participation by Australia would encourage the formation of a more broadly-based peacekeeping force which would enhance prospects for international acceptance of the peacekeeping force - a force which is needed to ensure that Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai can be carried out in accordance with international commitments; Australia has given strong support to the development of the peace process in the Middle East and has a responsibility to follow up with practical assistance; President Sadat took great political risks in initiating and persevering with the peace process and it is vital for his successors who have committed themselves to support that peace process that the remaining third of Sinai still under Israeli control be regained by Egypt in April 1982; the failure of Australia and other Western countries to participate would require the United States to bear the burden itself and would be seen as a failure by the West to support United States policies in the Middle East. This would risk giving propaganda opportunities to the Soviet Union, whereas participation in peacekeeping would encourage constructive United States involvement in efforts to bring about a lasting settlement of Arab/Israeli differences. Our participation would be welcomed by Egypt and Israel, as well as the United States, and our participation would imply our continuing support for Israel's security; it would have positive impact on Israel's approach to negotiating similar arrangements for its other borders.

A number of arguments have also been used against Australian participation. It is sometimes said that our policy has been to participate only in United Nations sponsored peacekeeping operations, and that a force which was not broadly based would find little international acceptance. Some have said that the Middle East is remote from Australia and that the reactions of other states in the region might be adverse. Some have said that the extent of any Australian commitment would be uncertain and potentially too extensive, especially in view of our commitment to participate in peacekeeping in Namibia. Some have said that participation in a peacekeeping force in such a volatile area is too risky, and that it might even result in an adverse impact on support in Australia for our relationship with the United States.

While there are weighty considerations on both sides a number of factors have led the Government to the view that Australia must be prepared to contribute to the multinational peacekeeping force.

The starting point is that Australia has a clear and strong national interest in the progress of peace in the Middle East.

It is first and foremost a matter of deciding what it is in our own national interest to do, and then acting accordingly.

Without question, the continued progress towards peace in the Middle East is of enormous significance to Australia. An outbreak of conflict would have repercussions not only for the region but for the peace of the world which would affect us profoundly and in manifold ways. It would affect our allies and friends in ways which could not but impinge greatly on our international relationships and with risks for the strategic balance of great moment to our national security. Australia's interest is in seeing what is probably the single most serious threat to world peace removed. Further warfare in the Middle East could trigger off a much wider war.

Australia has a legitimate interest in preventing this. This point is so evidently true that I believe it does not require elaboration here. There is also the economic fact that Egypt is Australia's largest single trading partner in the Middle East.

As the Deputy Prime Minister said in the House yesterday, a stable Egypt is very important to the whole of our trade with the Middle East region. It is in the interests of Australia and the whole world that Egypt's stability be maintained, and this maintenance requires continued international support for the policies commenced by President Sadat, and which his successor President Mubarek is pledged to continue. That we have an interest in peace, rather than war, in the Middle East is, I believe, indisputable.

This leads to the second fact which has weighed in our decision - that the peace process which has been begun in the region under the Camp David Accords is the only framework for peace which has been put forward in the long history of that region which shows some prospect of achieving its immediate objectives. While other proposals have been made from time to time, none has yet achieved the degree of acceptance from Israel and Egypt the Camp David Accords have achieved.

Senator Church made this point eloquently in Canberra yesterday when he said: "There has been much said for and against the Camp David Accords, but remember that those Accords, though they are still only partially implemented - and far from perfect - represent the only formula that has yet achieved a peace in this part of the world..."

A central part of the Camp David process is the establishment of a peacekeeping force in the Sinai. The Government is aware that many Arab Governments have stated public opposition to the Camp David Accords. The Government believes, however, that there is support for the concept of returning Arab land to Arab sovereignty: in this case returning Sinai to its rightful owner, the Government of Egypt.

The Government attaches great importance to its relations with Arab countries, and understands their wish to achieve a settlement which makes proper provision for the interests of the Palestinian people. Australia hopes that its relations with Arab countries will continue to develop. There is a growing realisation that many countries including a major part of the Arab world, are seeking the same objective - peace.

Given that peace in the Middle East is in Australia's national interest, and given that the only existent basis for peace is Israeli-Egyptian accommodation, and the establishment of a multinational peacekeeping force, Australia cannot avoid the question: do we have a capacity to make a contribution to the peace process by membership in that force?

One fact is plain: there is a limit to what Australia as a middle power can do. We must avoid an unrealistic view of what we can achieve. But to say that there are limits is in no way to say that we could not make a useful and a valuable contribution, in conjunction with other countries who share our interests and our concern for peace in the region.

Egypt, Israel and the United States - the nations which signed the agreement in August this year providing for the establishment of a multinational peacekeeping force - have made it clear that they would welcome Australian participation in the force. Indeed, they have indicated that they attach great importance to our participation and that the assassination of President Sadat has made that participation even more important to them.

President Sadat's successor, President Mubarek, has indicated his determination to remain on the course set by his predecessor. President Sadat's assassination has in fact created a greater need for international recognition of the conditions for peace in the Middle East.

Egypt without President Sadat needs more support from other nations to continue the peace process than Egypt with President Sadat, and the Egyptian Government made clear to the Deputy Prime Minister on his recent visit that this was very much its own perspective.

This consideration has weighed with the Government and has been significant in tipping the balance in favour of participation in the peacekeeping force. We have a capacity to contribute, and our contribution is sought by the countries most closely involved. These facts place the most weighty responsibility on us.

This Government has never taken the view that Australia should refrain from doing what it can to create a better and more peaceful world. Within realistic limits we have consistently argued that Australia has responsibilities, and must recognise those responsibilities in our actions.

Australia has had recent involvement in peacekeeping in the Middle East: Australian forces were part of the U.N. peacekeeping forces in the Sinai from 1976 to 1979 and were only withdrawn when the Soviet Union indicated that it would veto an extension of the force's U.N. mandate.

In this case it would obviously be more comfortable to do nothing - to say that peace in the Middle East does not concern us, or that we cannot contribute to peace. But neither of those propositions would be true. Those attitudes widely adopted amongst nations in other times and in other conflicts have led in the end to catastrophic war. If all nations wanting peace were to leave the active pursuit of peace to others, peace would fail by default - and we would all bear the tragic costs.

Australia is concerned. We can contribute. And accordingly, we have decided, provided certain reasonable conditions are met, to make a contribution to the multinational force.

On 12 October I wrote to President Reagan informing him that the Australian Government would agree to participate in the peacekeeping force if certain conditions were met. I informed President Reagan that the Government has decided that Australia will agree to participate in the Sinai peacekeeping force subject to Britain and Canada also agreeing to participate.

In the interests of obtaining the broadest-based international acceptance of the force, significant European participation is a critical factor. We are glad to see from published reports that France is reconsidering her attitude. The Australian contribution would be limited to the contribution we are initially called upon to make, and that contribution will be of limited duration to be agreed.

Apart from the membership of the peacekeeping force there are other matters which the Government believes are important to provide full protection for Australia's independence and sovereignty, and which were set out in my letter to President Reagan. As is usual practice, we would need to instruct the commander of any Australian contingent that if he received orders from the commander of the force which he believed were contrary to, or went beyond, the agreed purposes of the force, he should not comply with them until he had consulted with Australian authorities. No part of the peacekeeping force (including the United States component) should have any association with the United States Rapid Deployment Force.

A solution to the Palestinian issue is clearly central to the future stability and peace of the Middle East. In participating in the Sinai peacekeeping force we would be concerned that our contribution would have the maximum positive influence in continuing and broadening the peace process in the Middle East.

Australia has consistently supported the continuing peace process but we have been disappointed by the lack of progress and prospects for further movement in the autonomy negotiations.

I stated in my letter to President Reagan that Australia will be looking to the United States to exert and sustain the strongest pressure to ensure effective progress in implementing the Camp David Accords as they relate not only to the Sinai but also to Palestinian autonomy.

We recognise how much the United States has been doing in an endeavour to establish lasting peace in the Middle East. We recognise also what President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin were trying to do in their search for a peaceful solution. It is important for the Middle East and for the whole world that these efforts should be continued and should have the widest possible support.

Our participation in the peacekeeping force would be on the understanding that all the parties to the Accords abided by word and deed with their provisions, and press forward with a continuing peace process in the Middle East. The conditions necessary for Australia's participation have all been conveyed in the clearest terms to President Reagan. The Australian contribution under consideration at present comprises elements of an air transport unit, equipped with helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, and probably involving some 200-300 personnel. But the precise composition of our contribution will of course depend on the outcome of discussions with other participants. I want to set out step by step the timing of the decision and the discussions and consultations which led up to it, because it is important that there should be no misunderstandings about this. During the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting I would obviously want to have consulted with leaders, and at the time President Reagan put the same suggestion to me and to certain other countries. I consulted with the Prime Ministers of Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in Melbourne during the Conference. And then following the assassination of President Sadat, the Deputy Prime Minister consulted with Secretary of State Haig, Dr. MacGuigan, Lord Carrington and Mr. Colombo, who were in Cairo for President Sadat's funeral. These consultations in Cairo took place on 10 October, and I was informed of their content by cable and in telephone conversations with the Deputy Prime Minister.

The decision that Australia would participate under the conditions I have already outlined was taken on 12 October. And I want to make it plain that that decision was taken after consultation with, and with the agreement of, the Deputy Prime Minister who was overseas at the time.

The Government's decision about participation in the peacekeeping force and the conditions for that participation was conveyed by letter to the President of the United States and to the Prime Ministers of Great Britain and Canada on 12 October and the Prime Minister of New Zealand was subsequently advised of our position. It will be obvious to the House that while Australia's decision was taken on a completely independent basis, the practical commitment which will flow from it will depend upon the decisions of other Governments, and this is why I said in the House on Tuesday that "there is no procrastination on this issue by this Government" and also that "I expect to be in a position to make some announcement about this decision in the relatively near future, but that is not necessarily waiting on decisions of this Government, but decisions of other Governments".

It was appropriate, in view of the conditional nature of Australia's decision, that the other Governments should have some time to formulate their own positions in relation to that, but it is the view of the Government that events have now moved ahead and that Australia's decision should be made known.

The Australian Government believes that this multinational peacekeeping force is a significant step for peace. It is not a decision which is pro-Arab or pro-Israeli. It is a decision pro-peace. It is a decision which could never have been made had President Sadat not taken his historic initiatives.

The assassination of President Sadat has strengthened, not weakened, the need for international support for the peace process. A role of the utmost importance now falls on Prime Minister Begin. Many have questioned his approach to peace and the implications of his policies.

Australia has made abundantly clear on many occasions, its support for the State of Israel behind secure and recognized borders as specified in U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Our credentials on that matter are not exceeded by any nation. So let me from that point of support and friendship say that much will now depend on Prime Minister Begin and on the Israeli Parliament. There are many who believe that it was President Sadat who was foremost in carrying the banner for peace in the Middle East. Notwithstanding that Prime Minister Begin has fully participated in the progress to that point, with President Sadat's death there now falls to Prime Minister Begin the opportunity to hold aloft the banner of peace that President Sadat carried with such courage. Prime Minister Begin now has the opportunity to make sure that the autonomy talks are meaningful, and do all that he can to bring about positive results. Let him make sure that there is a true and fitting memorial to President Sadat in a peace settlement that can endure and that leads to a wider settlement in the Middle East.

There is a challenge before Prime Minister Begin, Israel, Egypt and other countries such as the United States to act with vigour and initiative so that those who celebrated President Sadat's death by firing their guns for joy are confounded, and the terrorists and promoters of discord are defeated. And let those who have used terror as an instrument recognise, with the vision of a Sadat, that the true road to peace lies in a recognition of Israel's right to exist - then discussion and negotiation can replace the sound of gunfire.

In making this commitment I wish to emphasise that what Australia will contribute to is a peacekeeping force - not to a conflict. The Sinai peacekeeping force will not be taking sides with either Egypt or Israel. It is not going to be involved in either military attack or defence in any military sense. Its role is to monitor, to observe.

I consider it most understandable that when two countries, with a long and sorry history of mutual conflict, decide to put this history behind them and engage in a new era of peace, they should wish to have mutual friends in whom they can have confidence to assist them in the sensitive business of overcoming past suspicions. The Sinai peacekeeping force is to play the role of mutual friend.

If the time should come when either party should wish to attack the Sinai force, then the whole peace process would have come to an end. By definition the force's role would already have come to an end and it would leave the region. But this situation will not come about, and it will not come about because Australia and other countries are ready to play their part, which is after all a modest part, in ensuring that Israel and Egypt pursue their mutually declared objective of developing a new and friendly relationship.

I realise that at the moment there are differences of view on this important issue. I hope that Honourable Members and the Australian public will give very careful consideration to all the considerations I have mentioned and will agree that in the end the right course for Australia is the one the Government has decided to take.

Australia has played a significant role over many years by its willingness to contribute to peacekeeping forces in trouble spots around the world, and while this particular decision has been more finely balanced than others, I have no doubt that in the end the easier decision would be irresponsible and wrong. The easier decision would be one we might well live to regret, for surely none of us would want the situation in which a failure on our part to help two countries in their search for a lasting peace might contribute to increasing instability in a region where it is the interest of Australia as of the whole world that there should be increasing stability.

I appeal to Members of the Opposition not to seek to divide Australia on this issue. I appeal to them not to be swayed by talk of war when the proposition and possible prospect is one of peace for one of the most war-torn parts of the whole world,

The conditions wrapped around this particular decision are such that all parties can accept the decision itself as one that in no way derogates from Australia's sovereignty, as one that recognises our responsibilities to do what we can to help achieve the objectives of peace that is so close to the hearts of Australians, as one that is in Australia's widest national interest.