



8

PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

TUESDAY, 8 DECEMBER, 1981

DEFENCE PRESENCE IN WEST AND NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA

As part of the overall strengthening of Australia's Defence Forces, the Government is taking a number of steps to support an enlarged program of defence deployment in West and North-West Australia.

The latest decision, announced last night by the Minister for Defence, will establish the first military presence in the Pilbara region. This will occur on Australia Day 1982, and take the form of two units of the 5th Independent Rifle Company, based at Newman and Tom Price. This Company will be known as the Pilbara Regiment, and further units will move into the area and be established as the Company develops.

The Government has recently sought the support of the Western Australian Government for its development of an amphibious training area at Exmouth Gulf. The Government envisages a steady increase in the number and scope of exercises in the West by Australian forces operating independently and in conjunction with our allies.

Discussions have been held with the Western Australian Government about possible locations for an additional naval base in north-west Australia, and Finucane Island near Port Hedland has been identified as a suitable site. It is envisaged that an appropriate facility will be included in the next 5-year rolling program, following further detailed examination by the Defence Department of the precise nature of the facility required, and the best way of providing it.

Early in 1984, the first RAN ship will be "home-porting" at HMAS Stirling and a second vessel will "home-port" there in 1985. The naval base at Cockburn Sound is being developed, at an estimated cost of about \$30 million. Last month an ammunition depot was brought into operation. Land has been acquired for the construction of about 200 houses for naval personnel. Consideration is being given to the construction of docking facilities for destroyers at a cost of over \$20 million.

.../2

Detailed planning is in hand to expand the army stores facilities at Guildford at an estimated cost of \$3 million, and also to develop army reserve training facilities at Karrakatta at a cost of over \$2 million.

In addition to these measures, the Government has increased surveillance over the Indian Ocean. The Government is committed to the development of an airfield at Derby South at a cost of over \$50 million. The existing airfield at Learmonth is being upgraded. A patrol boat base has been constructed in Darwin which will be opened early next year. And the Government will soon be making a substantial investment in facilities in Darwin to support the tactical fighter force which will be based there. This has obvious implications for north-west Australia.

Any question of defence in north-west Australia obviously depends not only on the defence presence and supporting infrastructure in the area, but also on the capacity of our defence forces as a whole. Australia's Defence Force is being steadily strengthened, in line with the Government's commitment to an adequate defence capacity for Australia.

Our own defence capabilities mutually reinforce those of our allies. We co-operate particularly closely with the United States. A warship of the RAN has been on station in the north-west Indian Ocean since mid-1980, where it has exercised with the United States Navy. The United States Strategic Air Command has been deploying B-52 aircraft through Darwin since early this year. Some 250 members of the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit participated in exercise "Valiant Usher" which was held at Lancelin, 100 kms north of Perth, in February. Elements from the same Unit exercised in the Exmouth Gulf area en route to Kangaroo 81 in October where some 2,000 troops participated in the major land exercise held in Australia this year. A submarine of the United States Indian Ocean task force visits Cockburn Sound about once a month. In the framework of the ANZUS treaty, we work very closely with New Zealand and the United States not only in military exercises but in a whole range of political, strategic and logistic arrangements.

Again, under the Five Power Defence Arrangements we co-operate with Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand in important naval, air and land exercises. Skyhawks of the Singapore Airforce train in Australia. Orion Long Range Maritime Patrol aircraft are deployed through Butterworth where Malaysian Airforce personnel co-operate in ocean surveillance.

So the defence co-operation that we have with our allies and our neighbours is growing in depth and importance. It enhances Australian security, including that of Western Australia.