



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
PRESS CONFERENCE - BANGKOK, CANBERRA, 20 MAY 1992

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PM: I have just got a few minutes so I want just to give you a comment on the situation in Thailand. I would like to begin by saying that I take this opportunity on behalf of all Australians to express our horror at the actions which have lead to this needless loss of life in Bangkok. We are appalled at the wide spread use of excessive force by the Thai military, and our Embassy in Thailand is monitoring the situation. And I urge the Thai Government to ensure that the troops act with maximum restraint to avoid further bloodshed. Could I also say that as a result of the actions that have been taken to date by the Thai military, the Government is, in response to that action, withdrawing 20 Australian soldiers from the Special Air Services Regiment and 11 C130 Aircrew which were deployed to Thailand on May 5 for training with the Royal Thai Special Warfare Command. We think it is incongruous that in these circumstances Australian military personnel be training with Thai personnel while the Thai military are taking this action against their citizens. So we are withdrawing that Special Air Services Regiment and the air crew that accompany them. Could I also say that the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, John Kerin, will be closely monitoring developments and we will be looking at our relations with Thailand in the light of how the situation unfolds.

J: Does that mean, Prime Minister, that you are prepared to downgrade our diplomatic relationship with them if necessary?

PM: Well I think we will just put the whole relationship under review. I think one can see the tragic contrast between the developments in Thailand over the last period, the recent years of prosperity and stability, with what's happening now. We have sought, through both aid and advice, to make Thailand a better place for the Thai people to live and we take that responsibility seriously. But because of this violence we will examine the whole relationship.

J: Prime Minister are you considering suspending economic aid as well as military?

PM: Not at this stage. I have made clear in the past that there can be a linkage to State-sponsored violence, but the aid is, after all, humanitarian aid and economic aid. It is aid for the people of Thailand, it is not for the Generals. And again, the aid tap can't be turned just on and off over night. It's projects, and it's goods and services, and so in our examination of aspects of the relationship we will examine the aid program as well.

J: Has any thought been given to bringing the Ambassador back for consultations?

PM: Well I think it is important that there is somebody there who we can speak to and who is also in a position to address the Government, and so I think the Ambassador is in an important place at the moment.

J: There have been some allegations by commentators in Thailand that the violence has been premeditated rather than just a response of a volatile situation. What's your reading of the situation?

PM: I don't think I can give you a reading on that.

J: How do you respond to the Opposition's claim that the Government's response has been slow?

PM: Look, Dr Hewson jumps on everything these days. Any event and he has a silly press statement out five minutes later dictated over a portable phone somewhere. I mean the fact is, Dr Blewett issued a statement yesterday, it was not clear until late yesterday what the general situation was. Our Ambassador was not in a position to give us an indication, and I think our response will be both timely and firm.

J: Mr Keating what sort of political pressure can we put on to Bangkok to stop?

PM: Well I think international opinion, including the opinion of neighbours, is going to matter to all countries. And the fact that I am saying that we are appalled by the violence, that we express our horror at the action of seeing the military of this country shooting down citizens is about as strong a position as we could say or take.

J: Does it concern you that very few, if any, of Thailand's ASEAN neighbours have publicly criticised the Thai military over its actions? Is it an indication to you of just how hard it is going to be to enmesh Australia in the region?

PM: Well I think, I have said this to the House and I will say it again, we will be giving our views about violation if we see a violation of human rights no matter where it occurs or how it occurs. One of the things I have been saying in recent times that our traditions, and our respect for these things will not be diminished by any wish we may have to become more closely enmeshed with the region. But again, you can't tar the region either with these sorts of problems.

J: Are these the only Australian troops in Thailand?

PM: yes.

J: The Thai Officers in Australia at the moment - could that be a second level of response, to send them home?

PM: Well there is a clear incongruity about Australian Military Officers in a country where these violations are occurring and in training with the service which is actually perpetrating. This is not the case here, and I think that widely fits into a general thought, or review of the relationship in the broad.

J: What was your personal reaction when you saw the footage on TV?

PM: Well I couldn't be anything but appalled by it. You really hardly believe it is happening.

J: Will you support an international arms embargo against Thailand?

PM: Look, this has happened 24 hours ago, so before you start getting declaratory about all these things, we will have the whole relationship looked at.

J: Do you accept the arrangement which gave the Left the next vacancy in your ministry?

PM: Look, I didn't come here for a general press conference, my friend, I see enough of you, not as much as I am sure you would like me to see of you, but I have got an ERC Meeting that should have taken place 35 minutes ago, so I better go.

J: Prime Minister will you be sending your views direct to the Thai Prime Minister?

PM: Well our view has been communicated already by our Ambassador and any amplification of that view will be sent directly, exactly.

J: If the killing stops will the military exercises resume?

PM: They are not going to be resuming because they have been brought back to Australia. And before any other military exercises obviously will take place, the whole relationship will have to be changed, clarified, and settled.

J: Is the information you're getting suggesting that the military may be prepared to compromise, or is your information suggesting that the crack-down will continue?

PM: Well it is not clear as to whether or not more violence will be perpetrated in the course of this day. I can't give you an answer. But nor can I give you the view that it won't be. It was sporadic, and has ceased. That unfortunately may not be true.

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