

BISHOPS' LETTER ON VIETNAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, the Rt.Hon. Sir Robert Menzies

On March 12, a letter signed by a number of bishops of the Anglican Church was received by the Prime Minister. It dealt with events in Vietnam.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister replied to the letter in the following terms :-

"I have given careful thought to your letter of March 12th, relating to events in Vietnam. As your letter was published in the press, I shall give publicity to my reply, when you have received it.

You urge that my Government should be seen to be taking 'positive steps towards an honourable and peaceful settlement of the fighting in Vietnam.'

Now, that all of us in our country want peace is axiomatic. The whole strength of Australia's diplomatic forces in countries to which they are accredited is directed almost daily to the removal of difficulties and the promotion of peace. But before any nation such as the U.S.A. "negotiates" for peace, realism requires -

- (a) that the other party or parties to the conflict should be willing to negotiate; and
- (b) that there should be a genuine cease-fire, strictly and honourably observed; and
- (c) that there should be some reasonable assurance that aggression and subversion will come to an end.

It is at this point that your letter surprises and distresses me. Although you are urging some form of political action upon me and my colleagues in relation to the fighting in Vietnam, you go on to say that you are 'not concerned here to canvass the merits of the respective attitudes of the North and South Vietnamese Government, or the Governments of the United States and China.'

Well, all I can say is that the Government is and must be concerned. Indeed, it seems elementary to me that unless we have some ideas on the merits of these matters, our actions will be those of expediency and not those of principle.

I therefore address myself to the merits, to which, I fear, you attach little significance.

You refer to the Geneva agreements of 1954. These provided a military demarcation line at the 17th parallel, separating North and South Vietnam, with a demilitarised zone of five kilometres on each side. Each side was to 'order and enforce the complete cessation of all hostilities in Vietnam by all armed forces under their control'.

North Vietnam is under Communist rule. The political views of Hanoi are not to be distinguished from those of Peking. There can, in our opinion, be no doubt that the Geneva Accords have been consistently violated by the Communists, partly by direct attacks across the line, partly by infiltration and supply, and partly by the establishment and maintenance of the Communist insurgents known as the Viet Cong, whose activities are directed to the overthrow of government in South Vietnam and to the ultimate establishment there of a Communist regime. These facts are not seriously denied. In 1960 they were expressly conceded by the Government and Communist Party in North Vietnam. At the request of the Government of South Vietnam the United States has deployed forces in that country, to aid in its defence, and we, under similar circumstances, have given military and material aid. These steps are denounced by the Communists as 'Imperialism', though it is quite clear that they have been taken in the defence of local freedom and self-government against an imperialist aggression which, if not restricted by deeds, will lead to the over-running of South-East Asia by aggressive Communism and a complete loss of the existing freedom of non-Communist countries.

Are there no merits here to be considered by Church leaders? There can be no true composition between atheistic and materialistic Communism and countries with deep religious beliefs. True, there can be, given good faith on both sides, peaceful co-existence and mutual tolerance. But these cannot continue if aggression continues and grows and is unchecked except by fine words.

We have considered the merits, as any Government must. We believe as do all those who have been prepared to consider the merits, that the United States policies and actions in relation to South Vietnam are right, and should be supported; that they derive from a courageous and generous acceptance of responsibilities for the protection of human freedom.

You urge that we join with some other authorities 'in bringing to a close a war that is costing so many lives and reducing the economy of Vietnam to chaos.'

I agree that the war is costing many lives and is damaging Vietnam. But how is it to be brought to a close? The Viet Cong and the forces of Hanoi are backed by Communist China, a country which rejects peaceful co-existence and practises, as it has already shown in India and Tibet, an aggressive imperialism. Is the United States to withdraw, and abandon South Vietnam? This would no doubt lead to a conquest which would end the armed conflict by conceding victory to the Communists.

Or is the United States, without withdrawal or abandonment, to negotiate for peace? With whom? About what? These are two vital questions.

How would they negotiate with the Viet Cong, well organised but hidden, practising the night attack upon villages, determined upon revolution by violence? How would they negotiate with North Vietnam, a country which has shown that it will be bound by no agreement?

How could they negotiate with Communist China, the home of aggression, except upon a basis of assured independence and freedom for South Vietnam and those other countries of South-East Asia which are now threatened by Communist expansionism?

Sir, the change of heart that is needed to lay a good foundation for a fruitful negotiation and a lasting peace must occur in the Communist bodies. It will occur all the sooner if aggression is met by resistance, if we remain clear about what it is that we are defending, and if we, and all our allies, can make it well understood that we are not concerned to conquer others, but that we will do our part to preserve freedom where it now exists. Freedom is, in this world, not expendable. And free people are not aggressors."

CANBERRA,
25th March, 1965