

V I E T N A M

EXCHANGE OF LETTERS BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER,  
THE RT. HON. SIR ROBERT MENZIES, K.T., C.H., Q.C., M.P.

and

THE RT. REV. J.S. MOYES, C.M.G.,  
AND CERTAIN ARCHBISHOPS AND BISHOPS

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TEXT OF BISHOPS' LETTER

OF 12th MARCH, 1965

There are a number of us deeply concerned that our Government should be seen to be taking positive steps, with others, towards an honourable and peaceful settlement of the fighting in Vietnam.

Already His Holiness the Pope, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, and the Governments of Canada, India and France have urged through both private and formal diplomatic channels their earnest desire for negotiations leading to peace.

We are not concerned here to canvass the merits of the respective attitudes of the North and South Vietnamese Governments, or of the Governments of the United States and China.

We have in mind, however, the attitude of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom at the time of the Geneva Agreements in 1954, and since.

We also realise that liberal opinion in the U.S.A., as reflected by the "New York Times" and by sober commentators like Mr. Walter Lippmann, by no means agrees with their Government's policy. Although the U.S.A. was not a signatory to the 1954 Geneva Agreements, yet in a statement made on 21st July that year they undertook to refrain from the threat of the use of force in the matter of Vietnam.

It seems to us that our Government, because we owe so much to our Ally, the United States of America, is morally bound to help our Ally, in the friendliest and most loyal spirit, to avoid a policy that can lead to an extension of hostilities. We would hope that our nation, living as we do in the Asian world, should join with the Pope, U Thant and the distinguished leaders of the other Western nations mentioned above, in bringing to a close a war that is costing so many lives and reducing the economy of Vietnam to chaos.

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TEXT OF PRIME MINISTER'S  
REPLY OF 24th MARCH, 1965

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 Governments, 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.

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TEXT OF BISHOPS' LETTER  
OF 9th APRIL, 1965

We thank you for your thoughtful reply of March 24th to our joint letter of March 11th. We beg you to give further consideration to the urgent request of our letter, in the earnest hope that continuing discussion will clarify the real issues.

It puzzles us that you should be "surprised and distressed" because we did not canvass -- i.e., set forth and discuss in detail -- all the facts. This, as you must realise, would have involved hundreds of pages. So far from "attaching little significance" to the "merits of these matters," we naturally attach the greatest importance to them, as some of us have meanwhile made clear. We must insist, however, on examining the merits of both sides.

The illegal activities of North Viet Nam are constantly being brought to our notice. We feel bound to point out that the South is not blameless. Your reference to the Geneva accords of 1954 as having been "consistently violated by the Communists" is surely less than the whole truth of the matter. Both North and South, and China and the United States, have violated the agreements. Two serious breaches of the spirit and letter of the Geneva agreements have been committed by the South, with full knowledge and approval, and active support, of the United States. They are:-

- i. the continued refusal to hold free elections; and
- ii. the grant of military bases to a foreign power.

As to (i), the fact is that it was agreed at Geneva on July 21st, 1954, that "General Elections shall be held in July, 1956, under the supervision

of an international commission composed of representatives of the member states of the international supervisory commission referred to in the agreements on the cessation of hostilities." These elections have never been held. Responsibility for this rests squarely on the Government of South Viet Nam, backed by the United States. No authority known to us disagrees that any fair and free election since 1954 would have resulted in a victory for the supporters of Ho Chi Minh. If people want to be communists, guns will not stop them.

As to (ii), we remind you that Paragraph (iv) of the Final Declaration on Indo-China of July 21st, 1954 reads; "The Conference takes note of the clauses ... prohibiting the introduction into Viet Nam of foreign troops and military personnel as well as of all kinds of arms and munitions." We remind you further of Paragraph (v) of the same Declaration: "The Conference takes note ... that no military base at the disposition of a foreign State may be established in the regrouping zones of the two parties..."

The main contention of your letter is that we are indifferent to the moral and religious elements in the situation, whereas you and your Government are deeply concerned with both. You think of the war as a crusade being carried out by the Christian forces of the "deeply religious" people of South Viet Nam, the United States and, presumably, Australia, against "the atheistic and materialistic" forces of North Viet Nam and China. We find ourselves unable to make this clear moral and religious distinction and, moreover, regard the making of such a distinction as in itself open to grave moral question. We can understand the desire to

restrain the political imperialism of China, and even the necessity of using force to do it, but we cannot ourselves justify it on your grounds, namely, that the United States and ourselves are altruistically coming to the rescue of "local freedom and self government".

The government of South Viet Nam rests upon no basis of popular or democratic support. It was from its beginning, until last year, a dictatorship of the late Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem. In these circumstances, it seems to us to be idealising the situation to write of U.S. support of "local freedom and self government."

As for your observation that "there can be no true composition between atheistic and materialistic communism and countries with deep religious beliefs," we can only say that there are millions of Christians in Russia and China who are compelled to do just this. We have no right to criticise them, since we have not ourselves been put to this test. It seems to us preferable in this war, as with all wars, carefully to keep references to "deep religious belief" above the evil it may help to resolve, and not to misuse it to bolster one side of the case or the other.

On one of your political judgements we feel bound to take issue. You say "the political views of Hanoi are not to be distinguished from those of Peking." We doubt the validity of your identification. Is it not like identifying Moscow with Belgrade and Warsaw -- and Peking?

Finally, you ask how the war is to be brought to a close. We can only reiterate the hope which was the main point of our original letter, that you will use your great influence and

experience to support the possibility of negotiations. We cannot think that we, or others more distinguished, are hopelessly deluded in asking that negotiations become the declared objective of Australian diplomacy. In urging this plea, we are supported by His Holiness the Pope, by U Thant, and by the Governments of France and India, to which has been added the commanding voice of your fellow Prime Minister of a Dominion, Mr. Lester Pearson, and Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom. To all these have now been added the proposals of President Johnson himself. We feel no distress at finding ourselves in such company.

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TEXT OF PRIME MINISTER'S  
REPLY OF 20th APRIL, 1965

I have your letter of April 9th, answering mine to you of March 24th, and have given it my most earnest consideration.

Fortified again, I may say, by close consultation with the Minister and Department of External Affairs, I will proceed to deal with the substance of your propositions.

You dismiss the actions of North Vietnam, in a single phrase, as "illegal activities". The rest of your letter contains, in detail and at some length, a critical attack upon South Vietnam and her supporters.

You accuse them of two violations of the Geneva Accords of 1954. You should recall that the United States and South Vietnamese governments did not subscribe to the Final Declaration, but made separate statements indicating that they would not use force to prevent the execution of the agreements. The United States declared that it would view any renewal of aggression, in violation of the agreement, with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security.

You allege two serious breaches by the South, approved and supported by the United States. They are, to use your own language,

1. "The continued refusal to hold free elections".

This refers, as you make clear, to elections over both North and South Vietnam. You then go on to assert a proposition which I find astonishing.

Your words are --

"These elections have never been held. Responsibility for this rests squarely on the Government of South Vietnam, backed by the United States. No authority known to us disagrees that any fair and free election since 1954 would have resulted in a victory for the supporters of Ho Chi Minh."

Surely nobody will deny that North Vietnam is under complete Communist control, and that "free elections" simply cannot happen. That Ho Chi Minh would win in North Vietnam is clear enough, for there would and could be no other candidate.

How you can blame South Vietnam for the absence of a "fair and free election" in North Vietnam therefore passes my comprehension.

Let me remind you too that if the North had not actively sought to overthrow the government of the South by force, and by supporting the pockets of Communist Viet Cong in their violent campaigns in the South, the people of the South would be at peace, and the way for orderly self-government would be open.

2. The second "serious breach" alleged by you is "the grant (by South Vietnam), of military bases to a foreign power."

The first answer to this is that it is simply inaccurate. No "military bases" have been granted to the United States.

True, that country has sent some forces into South Vietnam, at the request of that country, to assist in its defence against unprovoked aggression. So have we, in a small way. Such actions are in strict conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. I fear that you have overlooked the vital fact that South Vietnam did not begin these troubles. To play down the aggression and incitement from the North, and to devote your major criticism to the defenders, is a strange line of argument.

You next accuse us of "idealising" the situation in Vietnam by speaking of "U.S. support of local freedom and self-government". How do you suppose that freedom in South Vietnam can be fully achieved and maintained when that country is torn about by murderous subversion fomented and supported from the Communist North? A life and death struggle of this kind does not lend itself to theory.

Finally, you appear to pray in aid the recent statement by President Johnson. I respectfully suggest that you study the full text of that statement. It powerfully supports what my colleague, Mr. Hasluck, and I have been saying about the course and causes of the events in Vietnam, and is fundamentally at odds with your own analysis. It explains the American presence and actions. It faces the facts.

For example (and I will not quote in extenso) the President said --

"Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change. This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight in the jungles of Vietnam."

"We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure. This kind of a world will never be built by bombs or bullets. Yet the infirmities of men are such that force must often precede reason - and the waste of war, the works of peace. We wish this were not so. But we must deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish."

"But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from North to South. This support is the heart-beat of the war. And it is a war of unparelled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to the government. Small and helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities. The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy. Over this war - and all Asia - is another reality, the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers of Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, attacked India, and been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is



helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Vietnam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purpose."

And later he said --

"We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement."

And then --

"It should also be clear that the only path for reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement. Such peace demands an independent South Vietnam - securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others - free from outside interference - tied to no alliance - a military base for no other country."

It is against the background of these clear statements and for their achievement that the President has said, once more, that he is willing to have discussions.

It is because we agree with all this that, in answering a recent Parliamentary question, I said that I could not support a suggestion "that the United States, instead of fighting, should negotiate".

My colleagues and I must decline to be cast for the roles of warmongers and supporters of illicit action on the part of the United States or South Vietnam. We are constantly aware of our duties to our country and our people. One of those duties is to do what we can to keep the peace, and to help others to keep it. Another is to be acutely

aware of the need to preserve the security of Australia. It would be a sorry day if, by undermining the will and capacity to resist in South-East Asia, we found aggressive Communism moving nearer to our own shores. We will observe our obligations under SEATO and ANZUS not only because Australia has pledged its word - a reason compelling enough, in all conscience - but because those obligations have been accepted on behalf of our own free future.

To sum up, my Lord Bishop, we have never approached the problem in a negative way. We have no desire for hostilities to spread or to grow more intense, though, if this is forced upon us, we will face the resulting situation and not seek to avoid it.

Like President Johnson, we wish South Vietnam and the whole of South and South-East Asia to live in peace and international amity and to have full and free opportunities for economic development and national independence. It is just because we believe in these positive objectives that we find ourselves unable to ignore the lessons of the 20th Century and to acquiesce placidly in the destruction of the independence of South Vietnam, either by direct outside armed Communist aggression or by internal armed Communist insurrection and subversion stimulated and sustained, as I am sure you must agree, through North Vietnam.

You have now twice publicly stated your views. This letter contains my second answer. You will, I am sure, understand that I must now leave the issues to the judgment of public opinion. I cannot, consistently with many pressing duties, continue this correspondence. But it has, I think, served a valuable public purpose.

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