

P.M. No. 7/1966

RESUMPTION OF BOMBING IN NORTH VIET NAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

President Johnson has made a statement about the resumption of bombing in North Viet Nam directed against installations and transport routes used for the conduct of warfare in South Viet Nam.

The bombing was suspended in December, even though an earlier pause in bombing last May had evoked no positive response, and even though there were strong military reasons for the continuance of bombing. The North Vietnamese authorities had, for a period of months, increased the rate of infiltration of armed men to South Viet Nam. In the last six months of 1965, many thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers entered South Viet Nam as units and equipped for open warfare.

The purpose of the bombing has been not to destroy the regime in Hanoi or break the economy of North Viet Nam, or to shatter the basis of the people's livelihood, but to damage or destroy those military installations and facilities which enable Hanoi to supply and support its own forces in the South and those of the Viet Cong.

The suspension of the bombing was of a very substantial military and political significance. It meant a self-imposed denial by the United States of the use of a valuable military weapon. It was part of a programme of action designed to encourage North Viet Nam to turn back from its course of increasingly open military intervention in South Viet Nam. Having suspended the bombing, the United States undertook active diplomatic efforts to make known its genuine wish for an end to the warfare and for discussion leading to a just solution by peaceful means. Governments of communist countries and of non-aligned countries which might possess some influence in Peking and Hanoi were approached. Direct contacts were made in some capitals where the United States and North Viet Nam were both represented.

From Washington and Saigon, the Australian Government was kept fully informed of these developments. Mr. Averell Harriman visited Canberra for discussions with us. The approaches made by the United States were widely welcomed throughout the world, but regrettably, brought no sign of any disposition on the part of the other side to modify its determination to continue the war. On the contrary, the North Vietnamese took advantage of the respite from bombing to repair and improve their system of

infiltration. A considerable volume of traffic has passed through this system into South Viet Nam. Certainly in larger volume and at a faster rate than would have been possible if bombing had been continued to impede it.

Private contacts brought forth no positive responses. Peking, Hanoi and the Liberation Front have denounced the United States efforts, describing them as a manoeuvre to cover up an intensification and expansion of aggressive war in Viet Nam. The Liberation Front pledges itself "to make greater efforts to strike harder at the heads of the aggressors, deal them heavier punishments, and make them realise that their only honourable path at the present time is a quick withdrawal from South Viet Nam."

The latest United States initiatives have thus been rejected as summarily and emphatically as have other efforts made in the past.

It has consistently been the view of the Australian Government that North Viet Nam must not be permitted to remain a haven immune from military risk, from which military aggression against the South can be mounted with impunity. Because we believe North Viet Nam cannot be left free to mount military operations against South Viet Nam and against the American, Australian, New Zealand and Korean soldiers who are helping to defend the country, we firmly support the American decision as realistic and necessary. It remains our hope, however, that the North Vietnamese and those associated with them will recognise that their aggression will not be allowed to succeed. We must hope that the time is not distant when they will join in finding a just and peaceful solution. While the aggression continues, it will be met firmly by resistance in which Australia will play its part. We know that the United States will remain alert and ready to explore any indication of willingness on the other side to move towards a settlement on just terms.

The United States readiness in this respect is indicated by the request of the United States Government for an urgent meeting of the Security Council to consider the situation in Viet Nam.

CANBERRA,
1st February, 1966.