

INCREASED AID TO VIET NAM



STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HAROLD GOET,
FOR RADIO AND TV

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Mr. Calwell's proposal for a referendum in relation to the despatch of National Servicemen to South Viet Nam I think reflects a misunderstanding of what is proposed.

He harks back to the quite dissimilar situation which existed in the First and Second World Wars. There people enlisted for service for an indefinite period of years and in the result, many were absent from Australia for a number of years. But our National Servicemen have a two-year term of duty. Most of them will have been under training for the best part of twelve months before they are moved to South Viet Nam and the term of duty there would be in the neighbourhood of a twelve months' tour of duty; that is the period which would have been served approximately by our present battalion there before it is relieved, and this would be in contemplation for the Task Force which we have decided to send to South Viet Nam. And so on return from service there, many of our National Servicemen would be very close to the conclusion of their two-year term of duty or would actually have passed beyond that point, and they could only be extended beyond that point by their own decision. So that the situation is scarcely comparable.

Now, I would hope that this service can be seen in its true perspective in view of the explanations that I have given. We felt that the despatch of the Task Force was the most effective military contribution that Australia can make at this time. We are assured by our military advisers that it would be the most effective. It is the smallest force that we can despatch which could function effectively as a completely serviced Australian unit under Australian command, and there is great advantage in having a unified Australian command, our own body of men responding to Australian leadership and giving Australia an identifiable role in this conflict.

The episode which has involved Gunner O'Neill is, of course, an unfortunate one which has given me personally a good deal of concern. I am easier in my mind now that I know that a very distinguished and able military leader in the person of the Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Wilton, has been personally giving his attention to the matter, and I would most certainly hope that this episode should not be allowed to blur the splendid image which has been established in Australia and indeed throughout the world by our forces in Viet Nam.
