



PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. HAROLD HOLT, AT SAIGON.

26th April, 1966.

Thank you Mr. Linh for your introduction and good morning to you ladies and gentlemen.

As Mr. Linh has explained to you, I have a prepared statement.

I thought having regard to the need for translation, in respect of some of the members of the press, it might be desirable to have a statement prepared which could be translated before-hand and so it gives an outline of what I wish to say.

But you can supplement this to a certain extent by questions you may wish to ask.

You will appreciate, of course, that I am an official guest and the head of the Government in my own country and that does place some limitations upon the range of comments that one would otherwise, perhaps, be able to make in a visit of this sort, but I think we shall be able to cover the ground adequately enough together.

This morning sees the conclusion of my official visit to Viet Nam.

Later today I visit Ubon in Northern Thailand where an Australian Air Force Squadron is stationed.

From there I go to Bangkok, and subsequently to various centres where Australian Forces are serving in Malaysia and Singapore.

I have felt it important to go to all these centres because there is an impression in some countries and even among some people in our own country, that because Viet Nam is so very much in the news that we are not doing very much anywhere else.

Well, in point of fact, we have a military obligation and have undertaken military assistance in other centres and I shall be visiting these before I return to Australia.

I am deeply appreciative of the welcome which has been given to me in Viet Nam and of the many evidences of friend-ship and warm feeling for Australia which I have experienced.

I have had informative and useful exchanges of views with the Chairman of the National Leadership Committee, with the Prime Minister and with other Vietnamese leaders, as well as with Australian, United States and other officials.

These contacts, together with the observations I have been able to make in visits to military and other establishments, have given me a closer insight into the situation in Viet Nam and into current problems.

My conclusions and assessments have strongly confirmed the earlier judgments on which we have based our policies.

It was not necessary for me to come to Viet Nam to come to a firm conclusion as to the course of action Australia should pursue.

We have decided that course some considerable time ago but it has certainly strengthened and confirmed the assessments which we had earlier made in deciding those policies.

As Prime Minister of Australia I was able in person to convey to the Vietnamese Government the admiration and support of the Government and people of Australia for the South Vietnamese people in their struggle to preserve their national independence.

Our support for the Republic of Viet Nam has included moral support, International Political and Diplomatic support, as well as Military and Economic assistance.

We have a great interest in the effort of Viet Nam to achieve internal stability.

At the same time, we comprehend that this is no easy task, and the Government and people of Viet Nam may be assured of our understanding and awareness of the difficulties they face.

This country has for years been under Communist attack systematically designed to destroy the growth of its institutions and its structure of administration.

The Republic of Viet Nam also has faced great problems after the end of colonialism in bringing about national stability and cohesion.

But the will to resist Communist aggression and to prevent Communist domination is common to all the different elements other than the Viet Cong and its so-called liberation front.

This has been a constant factor throughout a period of political change.

I have discussed the military situation with the most senior military and diplomatic figures in the Government, the United States representation and that of Australia.

All have confidently expressed the view that the military threat can be successfully dealt with.

There are political difficulties which all recognise.

The task of the United States and Australia and of other allied countries is to help resist the aggression and ensure the security of the country while it establishes the basis for an enduring stability.

The aspirations of the Vietnamese people are the same as those of many other newly independent countries of South and South-East Asia, namely the right to the full and free exercise of sovereignty and national independence.

Each has the right to the forms of Government and society of its choice and to develop its own approach to the problems of economic and social development.

In resolutely waging its own struggle for freedom, South Viet Nam is making a major contribution to the security of the whole region.

The problems of security and development are, of course, interdependent.

Efforts to provide and preserve security by military means need to be complemented by measures designed to raise standards of living.

It was with particular interest, therefore, that I have learned about the Vietnamese Government's revolutionary development programme.

I knew, of course, of it in general before I came here but this visit has enabled me to learn about it in much more detail.

The programme is designed to counter the Communist threat to the villagers by providing protection and in various useful ways building a better life for the people in rural areas.

Yesterday morning I visited the Revolutionary Development Cadre Training Centre at Vung Tau where teams are being given comprehensive training for these tasks.

I was most impressed by the dedication of the instructing staff and the thoroughness and realism of their training programme.

Of special interest for me, of course, have been the visits to Australian military and civilian personnel serving in Viet Nam and the discussions I've had with them have been full of interest and valuable information.

Our present force is small but it is a highly trained and effective force, which includes a body of instructors working directly with the Vietnamese Armed Forces imparting their knowledge and skills to improve the performance of thousands of others.

We are now in the course of trebling the size of the present Australian effort to 4,500 men.

This will be a self-contained task force with two battalions, a special reconnaissance squadron, its own air transport support, artillery and so on.

In addition, the advisory training programme will continue.

I have been greatly encouraged by what I have seen of the work and the morale of the Australian Forces.

Wherever I have gone I have been given glowing accounts of their standard of performance.

They clearly have a well developed sense of purpose and a proper pride in their achievement.

They well understand the need for what they are doing.

In their military operations they have added to the security of the local villages and they themselves have had the satisfaction of seeing the villagers react favourably to the greater protection they have brought.

They have participated gladly in work of civic action through giving medical and dental services, help with sanitation, school construction, and the teaching of English.

The careful searches conducted by the battalion have led to the recovery of supplies of rice sufficient to feed many thousands of Viet Cong over a considerable period.

In addition, they have helped save rice harvests for the villages and have denied them to the Viet Cong.

They also fully realise the nature of the struggle and that the contributions they can make to security, welfare and social progress must supplement operations of a purely military kind.

I visited several hospitals and, of course, took particular interest in the admirable work of our own Australian surgical team at the Bien Hoa Provincial Hospital.

I believe much more needs to be done through international effort in the medical field.

I have been deeply impressed by the high morale and devotion to duty shown by all these Australians in the difficult and often arduous conditions in which they are fighting and working.

I would sum up comment on my visit by saying that it has been of absorbing interest, it will be of enduring benefit in my discussions with my Cabinet colleagues and for assessment of any future developments, and I shall take away with me an abiding impression of the resolution, the determination and devotion to the cause of freedom of the people of South Viet Nam themselves.

No comment on the current situation could ignore the tremendous part being played by the United States of America, its forces and its material contribution.

This, I believe, is an historic struggle which is proceeding in South Viet Nam today.

It could very well mark a turning point in history and if we can succeed not merely in gaining the military success but in establishing a better world order, or its foundation, or its example, in this area of the world, then I believe that those friendly forces and in particular the United States of America whose contribution is so vast, will have made a notable contribution to mankind's unending search for freedom and a better world order.
