

PRIME MINISTER'S TOUR OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Press Conference given by the Prime Minister,
Mr. Harold Holt on his arrival at
Bangkok Airport, Thailand

26TH APRIL, 1966

I would like to say how thankful I am to be able to take this opportunity to return so soon the visit which your Prime Minister has recently made to Australia.

As you may have learned, the principal purpose of my visit has been to visit the various countries of South-East Asia where Australian servicemen are serving and I have just come from four days in South Vietnam where we have Army and Air Force servicemen in Saigon at both Bien Hoa and Vung Tau.

We also have certain civilian units serving in that country including a surgical unit.

Quite recently we had taken a decision to treble Australia's representation of military forces in the Vietnam area and the first battalion of this task force marched through Sydney on the day I left Australia as a pre-embarkation march before coming to replace the battalion which has been on service in South Vietnam.

It is only last Thursday that I left my own country, indeed on that morning I was answering questions in the House of Representatives.

The following day, at the same time, I was with our troops in Saigon.

Today we have been conducting together in Bien Hoa our Anzac Day service.

Anzac Day for us is one of the most solemn and significant days in the national calendar as Australian and New Zealanders celebrate together the anniversary of their landing at Gallipoli 51 years ago, and your Excellency, this particular occasion has become a symbol in the minds of the countrymen of Australia and New Zealand of the need for each generation to fight its battle for the preservation of liberty, and we felt that there was special significance in our meeting together on this solemn day of commemoration at Bien Hoa where Australians and New Zealand servicemen are again fighting in this later generation in the cause of freedom and personal liberty.

We have flown from there (Bien Hoa) to Ubcn in your north where there is an Australian Air Force unit stationed and after my visit here where I look forward to having talks with your Prime Minister, and other senior members of the Government and of meeting His Majesty which it will give me great pleasure to do again now for the third time.

Some years ago I had the honour of escorting His Majesty and Her Majesty, The Queen, round the Australian Pavilion at Lausanne in Switzerland where we had an exhibition and then later they came to Australia and I was able to welcome them.

Now I greatly look forward to returning that meeting in their own country.

After these talks I fly to Malaysia and after Kuala Lumpur and Singapore I will be proceeding to Borneo.

At each of these places I shall be having talks with senior members of the Government and at the same time visiting Australian servicemen.

I think that what emerges from this visit is how close we have all become, how the problems and the dangers of the one have become the matters of concern for the other.

I was heartened by what I learned in Saigon.

I talked there to senior members of the Government of the United States administration, with our own Australian diplomatic service. I found them all expressing confidence in the outcome of the military situation although they do have some concern over the current political difficulties, but at least they are convinced that the Viet Cong cannot win and that increasingly from now forward the military success will be with the forces supporting the South Vietnamese Government, the Republic of Vietnam.

One of the most heartening, and I think the most promising developments, I think your Excellency, is the determination expressed by the Government of the Republic of Vietnam, by the United States administration and by our own Australian authorities and other friendly forces, to combine with the military operations services of a positive and constructive kind to improve the well being of the peoples in the areas that they release.

They have a programme of civic action which has been carefully planned and is being vigorously pursued.

We visited yesterday one of the institutes where cadres of men are being trained to go into villages in support of the defensive capacity of the villages, but at the same time to give specialist service and training so that the economic strength of the village and the well-being of the people can be materially improved and perhaps in this kind of combination of collaboration for purposes of security and welfare we have one of the really important answers to the people of Asia in general.

We can all watch with interest what develops in this direction because success will be a great victory for those who value freedom.

QUESTION:

Recently you introduced conscription in Australia I am wondering if this might make it possible for you to have more troops free to come to Thailand in the near future?

MR. HOLT:

Well, we have commitments in a number of directions; naturally there develops a certain amount of pressure from various sources for us to increase our establishment in each of those places.

I do not doubt that it would be desired that we should

have more people in Vietnam or more people in Borneo but you must remember that Australia is a country of less than 12,000,000 people, that we are currently trying to develop a continent the size of the United States of America and that we have this combination of tasks, the normal tasks of a modern Government, which are difficult enough, but added to those are the tasks of increasing our defence establishment and of the development of projects which if carried through will add to our own capacity to extend further aid, further military assistance to other people in need of it in this area of the world.
