

PRIME MINISTER'S TOUR OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Press Conference given by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt
at Singapore Airport

30TH APRIL, 1966

I thought it might be useful if I had a few comments of a general kind to make, as this really is the wind-up of my tour of the various countries of South-East Asia I have been visiting, and then provide an opportunity - a rather longer one than I was able to give you before - for any questions which you might wish to put to me.

I am sure those of you who live in this region or who have studied its problems closely will appreciate what a valuable experience it has been for me to visit in a relatively compressed period of time so considerable an area of South-East Asia. Since leaving Australia, I have of course covered a considerable territory, going first from here to Viet Nam, spending some days there, then on to Ubon in Thailand and into Bangkok for discussions with the Government of that country, coming from there then to Kuala Lumpur for further discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister, later meeting with Tunku Abdul Rahman at Butterworth where he came to join me at the dinner given by the Air Force mess.

But in addition I have been able to see Australian troops on station at various points in Malaysia and West Malaysia and more recently, including today, in Borneo.

Yesterday I was able to make, after having had the very useful talks with Dr Toh and other senior Ministers of the Government here, a long delayed but very welcome visit to the Singapore naval base. I have been talking about Singapore naval base for many years and this is the first time that I have been able to study it visually and at first hand with the senior officers who are stationed there. By flying over it in a helicopter, one got an admirable view of the base and its relationship to this area as a whole.

As you will know, Australia attaches considerable importance to a continued British maintenance of the base and in my talks with the representatives of the two Governments most closely affected, I find that they too have an appreciation of the contribution to stability and security in the area which we all derive from the considerable British presence here, that is represented by the base and its establishment.

I was impressed, too, of course, with the considerable part that the operations at the base play in the total economy of Singapore, and I can imagine how important it is on that account also to the Government and people of Singapore.

But a visit of this kind, spread over so wide an area and confined in point of time to little more than a week is, I believe, very helpful to perspective and to a judgment of events in the area. While I have concentrated on the countries where Australian troops are stationed, it is a fact that in each of these countries there is a common threat to be met. It varies in degree. It has been more intense at one point of time or another in one country or another; the threat of communist subversion, infiltration, aggression is, I would assert, common to all of these areas.

...../2

~~The fact that it is~~ seen at its most active degree and its most aggressive form in Viet Nam at this time should not obscure from our assessment of the total situation the fact that it is not so very long ago that we were contending with a very real emergency, as a result of communist guerilla activity in West Malaysia and affecting Singapore itself.

The Governments of each of these countries find it necessary to either maintain forces or take police action against threats as they arise of communist activity, and so those of us who wish to live in peace and security and make an orderly economic progress and developing relationship in our affairs with one another in this area of the world have to recognise this threat, and I believe we must combine, where occasion requires this of us, in order to stave off the threat as it develops.

We have as a country done this in the case of the threat when it presented itself here. We worked gladly in co-operation with other Commonwealth forces. We are meeting this problem, which is part of the total problem of confrontation, in Borneo at the present time and we know from the discussions I have had with the Government of Thailand that this Government has become concerned by the existence of communist subversion and an accelerated degree of infiltration and communist activity.

My own belief is that as the military situation improves in Viet Nam - and I feel confident that it will improve - one has only to see, as I have so recently done, the massive effort being put into the challenge there by the United States and other friendly forces; the Korean Government, for example, are contributing forty thousand troops.

I was told in Saigon that the activity at the airport there has made it the busiest in the world. I was a little sceptical about this. I said, "You don't mean to tell me more movements in a day there than at Idlewild in New York?" and I was assured that this was so. Well it is perhaps that there are so many movements and they go through such a long period of each of the days that this occurs, but it is illustrative, at least, of the massive effort which is going into the struggle there and which I believe will have a decisive effect upon the military aspects.

I have stated before quite emphatically, and it remains a strong view, that the Viet Cong will not win the military struggle, and while we may face other problems in the political field and a continuing problem for perhaps a long time to come in the military sphere, the communists may very well turn more of their attention as success eludes them in the military sphere to the political phase, and perhaps to stirring up trouble in some of these other countries that I have mentioned.

So not only does it become important for us to establish the security of South Viet Nam but we must maintain together a vigilance against any spread of this cancerous scourge through the other countries of South-East Asia.

What I have seen has encouraged me in other directions also, because I believe there has been a firm acceptance by all the governments - the military authorities and diplomatic representatives confirmed this for me - an acceptance by all the governments of the need to supplement vigorously the military efforts by what are variously termed programmes of resettlement - civic action, rural development and rural reforms and so forth, according to the requirements of the particular situation.

It comprises a significant part of the activities of Australian servicemen wherever they are stationed. I found that General Ky - Prime Minister Ky - was devoting a great deal of the time of his Government to these programmes.

We went to one of the institutes where rural cadres are being trained for varied duties and services which they can render in the villages and this programme literally extends to thousands, many thousands, of individuals.

The United States has clearly indicated through statements of President Johnson and through the other information I was able to acquire there that it recognises and is devoting considerable part of its efforts towards this material improvement of the standards of the people.

And what is being done, viewed against the background of the changes which have been occurring in South-East Asia as a result of the stirrings of a recognition for change, the bending of the pattern of centuries in some of the practices that are being carried out as attempts are made to adapt opportunities for employing modern technology to the age-old practices in rural activity in these various countries, the emergence of the processes of industrialisation and so forth - all these things are part of the lively dynamic situation in South-East Asia in particular which represents, I believe, one of the historic movements in the history of mankind.

Now, how these events work out, of course, is a matter more for speculation than for accurate assessment, but without necessarily trying to evolve any of the theories which seem to be confusing so many minds as to what is happening and why what is being done should be done, I believe that mere contemplation of the facts as they are occurring and as we know them, provides sufficient base for - or at least provide the material - for the kind of policies which the governments, the friendly governments associated together in one arrangement or another in this area of the world are putting forward to meet this common threat.

As to our own Australian forces, they are enthusiastic, they are devoted to their tasks and they well appreciate the need for their presence in the areas in which they find themselves. I found them in very good heart, functioning at a level, which I think I can say without bombast for my country, has earned the commendation of whichever country they have been located in.

But I think I might just say in conclusion, gentlemen, that I shall return to my own country feeling not a necessity for changes in policy, but strongly confirmed in the correctness of the policies that we have been pursuing and, I believe, better equipped as to certain aspects of detail to follow the course of events in these various countries, to make perhaps a better based assessment of what is occurring there and to draw on a volume of detail which has been acquired in these most intimate discussions which should prove of considerable value to myself and my colleagues for a long time ahead.

Although the time was short, when a head of government is assisted, as I have been, in the most friendly and helpful way by other governments to see as much as can be shown, and to hear in the most intimate fashion the closest information held by those governments, it can't fail to be a most valuable addition to knowledge and experience and I feel that this at least has been a very considerable dividend which I have drawn from this fascinating tour of South East-Asia.

Well, thank you. Could I now invite - perhaps this time from our Singapore friends - because we beat them to the punch in Australia last time and I think we should respect their opportunity. The other boys will be seeing me a good deal in Australia. Anyone from Singapore who'd like to ask a question or two?

Q. Sir, Britain has offered one million pounds in economic aid to Indonesia. In view of the confrontation, how does Australia feel?

MR. HOLT: Well, Australia made a gesture at the time of the flood experience in Java - we gave some aid to Indonesia. I'm sure that we have all retained a hope that Indonesia would resume a course of friendship with the countries of this area. It would be so much more beneficial, we believe, for Indonesia itself and it would certainly make the task of orderly and peaceful economic progress in other areas of South-East Asia more capable of management. But I don't think we should canvass the Indonesian situation too closely at this time. I don't think it would be helpful to an emergence from that situation of perhaps a better understanding. Those who are concerning themselves with the difficult problems of adjustment inside their own country would not welcome advice from us as to how they were to manage their affairs. For my part, I do take some comfort from the fact although it was a terrible event in human terms that there has been so clearly demonstrated resistance to communism in that country. The removal of communist influence in large areas of the administration at least reveals that to the extent that there have been changes, these changes have not been sympathetic to communism.

Q. Sir, in view of the latest developments and changes in Djakarta, do you expect an early solution to the Malaysian problem?

MR. HOLT: Well, I think I covered that one in what I just said. I'd prefer not to elaborate or speculate about the situation there. We have indicated to the Government of Indonesia that we would hope for a better relationship in the years ahead, but I shall await the events of the future hoping that there will be some brighter developments. But one can hope without necessarily being optimistic.

Q. Sir, the Singapore Government felt that the strength and scope of co-operation in the economic field with Australia is too limited. Do you think that Australia would rather modify its policy on this point?

MR. HOLT: We have had some discussions with your Government on this matter and I know that the Department of Trade has been considering some views, or perhaps requests, (I haven't had the documents brought under my own attention as yet) which were conveyed from the Government here to the Australian Government, I understand. But we will look at this matter, of course, in the helpful spirit that we always bring to matters which arise between a Government of Singapore and the Government of Australia.

We are ourselves a developing country trying to establish industries in order to build employment opportunities for our people and this must be appreciated, as I know it is. It is recognised here as one of the facts in the situation, but just how we can, either through action of our own or in association with other friendly countries, be of assistance to the Government of Singapore in the necessity it finds to create a considerable number of additional employment opportunities, this has yet to be resolved. But I repeat, you will find us approaching the matter helpfully.

Q. Sir, you were widely quoted up here, not so long ago, as saying that you felt Australia had a role to play as a bridge between East and West. Could you elaborate on what you had in mind there?

MR. HOLT: Well, elaborate is really the word, isn't it. I made a speech about this in New York which took the best part of an hour.

Interjection: Unfortunately, only the idea was reported.

MR. HOLT: The America/Asia Association had a conference in New York last year at which they invited me to speak, and this was the subject on which I was to speak. Great Britain, of course, in the case of Malaysia, has maintained very considerable forces here, but I am speaking of other aspects in which Great Britain understandably has not been as active, for example in the Asian Development Bank. That's roughly the sort of thing I had in mind.

Q. Is it too soon to talk about another tour, Sir - as lengthy tour?

MR. HOLT: In Asia, yes. I've got to get through an election first.

Q. Sir, there is some controversy about sending your National Servicemen to South Viet Nam. Have you had any change of heart at all as a result of this tour?

MR. HOLT: I haven't. I most certainly haven't had any change of heart. In fact, one sees the need for a National Service component in the Army even more clearly as we study the situation in these various areas. What I think has lingered in the minds of many Australians is a recollection of what occurred in the two World Wars, when Australia, without waiting for the threat to come to our own shores, joined with Allies to resist the aggression which developed and the military action which made a global war out of each of the crises of that time.

Now, we have had very substantial voluntary enlistments. It is not perhaps generally known that Australia sustained nearly half a million casualties in the two World Wars. I am sure that most people in the United States would be surprised to know that we lost more Australian servicemen killed in the First World War than the United States did. So that when our people think of an operation of war, they tend to think rather in terms of these two great world wars in which we had such a massive contribution of the nation's limited man-power.

But the situation here differs very notably from that. We are not engaged in a world war. We are engaged in resisting aggression in its most sinister and subversive forms, aggression which at times takes the form of military action but which calls for skilled troops, for hard-hitting, effective, mobile military, air and naval forces. And this is what Australia is trying to provide.

We believe that with the National Service component, we shall be able to maintain the orderly, regular contribution to our military needs with the least dislocation to the general national effort required in other directions as well.

MR. HOLT (Contd.) Here we are with a continent the size of the United States to develop, and less than twelve million to perform that task, so at the present time we are trying to carry on a programme of national development and associate with that an increasing provision for defence by way of these contributions in various parts of this area of the world.

I think that as people see more clearly in perspective the National Service element they will realise that this is not only the most efficient way, but I believe the fairest way for the young manhood of the nation to serve. They are selected by ballot and certainly those who have been so selected have accepted the obligation in a manly fashion.

NOTE : During the changeover of tape, one or two sentences were missed.

Mr. Holt said that the addition of a National Service component was the most efficient way of maintaining an orderly commitment, the efficiency of which would be greatly assisted by this scheme.

MR. HOLT : Thank you, gentlemen.
