

ADDITIONAL AUSTRALIAN FORCES FOR VIETNAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt

On Tuesday I promised to release further details of the proposed increase in Australia's forces assisting the allied effort in Vietnam. Following the discussions then in train with our allies, to which I then referred, I am now in a position to announce detailed arrangements for the deployment of the additional Australian units which will shortly move to Vietnam.

As I indicated in statements before the elections, it is the policy of the Government to review from time to time the Australian contribution to the security of Vietnam. I have also said on behalf of the Government on several occasions that Australia is determined to make with others a fitting and responsible contribution, in the light of our capacity and other commitments, to the winning of peace and stability in Vietnam.

Assistance in the economic and social fields is an essential part of our contribution to the peace and stability of South East Asia. The Departments concerned are at present preparing material which will enable the Government to review at an early date its existing programme of economic aid and welfare for South Vietnam. The purpose of our review will be to see what can usefully be done for the development of Australia's efforts in these fields.

The Government's policy takes into account the agreements reached by all the participating countries at the Manila Heads of Government Conference, held at the end of October last, in which the Ministers for External Affairs and Defence also took part. At Manila, the seven nations (Australia, Korea, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, United States and Vietnam) firmly declared -

- . that the freedom of South Vietnam should be secured
- . that their military and all other efforts would be continued as firmly and as long as may be necessary
- . that such military action and support must depend for its size and duration on the intensity and duration of the communist aggression itself.

The Government had before it assessments of the military situation in South Vietnam and of the intentions of North Vietnam. While the military picture is encouraging, it is clear that a balanced and sustained effort is vital if further success is to be won. As yet, we have seen no indication that North Vietnam is slackening in its attempt to bring about a communist victory in South Vietnam by force. The commitment of regular North Vietnam combat units continues at a substantial rate, infiltration being estimated at between 5,500 and 6,000 a month.

The numerous soundings and exploratory moves on the possibilities of peace have as yet produced nothing fruitful. The search for peace will continue. In the meantime, our military efforts are directed towards reaching a position where the other side will become convinced that aggression will not succeed, and that South Vietnam and its allies have the resources and the will to prevent it from succeeding.

The Government's view is that Australia's military effort in Vietnam should be a substantial and measured response, deriving from our capacity to contribute and with regard to our obligations as a whole.

Our existing commitment is an important one which has been and is being discharged to the greatest credit of the commanders and men of the Australia Force Vietnam. Their efforts have already clearly demonstrated that the Australian contribution is meaningful and effective. We intend that the commitment shall continue to be honoured fully, and that we play our part as a reliable ally.

After considering papers brought for Cabinet consideration by the Minister for Defence in which he reviewed the position, the following detailed arrangements for additional forces for Vietnam were decided upon.

Early in the New Year, additional ground and air forces and two units of the RAN will be deployed to South Vietnam. The total effect of these new deployments will be to increase the number of our personnel by more than one third from the present level of 4,600 to approximately 6,300. With these additions the Australian Force will be significantly strengthened and balanced. These additional commitments will require no increase in the present level of the National Service intake. All three Australian Armed Services are ready for combat operations under the particular circumstances of the present conflict. With the South Vietnamese themselves and with the United States, Australia will then be making a contribution in the air and at sea, as well as on the ground.

The existing Army strength of over 4,300 men is to be increased to about 5,200. Both combat and logistic support units will receive increases in personnel and this will provide all units with greater capacity to meet their tasks. This expanded Army contribution to Vietnam of some 900 officers and other ranks will improve the operational effectiveness of the Australian Task Force. There will be no change in the operational relationships between our own and other allied ground forces.

The additional men being provided will also enable a greater contribution to be made, through military civic action, to the welfare of the civilian population in our area of responsibility in Phuoc Tuy Province.

The Government has also decided to make available for service in the area, HMAS HOBART, a well-equipped modern destroyer which joined our fleet a few months ago. HOBART will operate as an integral part of the American Naval Forces, with similar roles and tasks.

For a considerable period American and South Vietnamese forces have conducted sea and air patrols with a view to the interdiction of coastal traffic and in order to counter the supply by coastal shipping of communist forces in South Vietnam. For maximum effectiveness, these operations must be continuous and require many ships and constant vigilance. HOBART will also be available to operate as required in general support of naval forces at sea.

A small under-water Naval Clearance Diving Team of "frogmen" will also be attached to American mine and obstacle clearance teams.

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In addition to its existing contribution of two squadrons of Caribou and Iroquois aircraft, the RAAF is to deploy to South Vietnam a squadron of 8 Canberra bomber aircraft. These aircraft will be positioned to operate in support of our own ground forces. They may be employed as part of the allied combat air contribution in support of other allied ground forces, and against enemy movements and concentrations.

It is expected that the additional forces will move to Vietnam during the early months of the New Year.

22nd December, 1966: