

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, C.H., M.P.,

ON

# VIETNAM

## Ministerial Statement



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[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 17 October 1967]

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**Mr HAROLD HOLT** (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—There have been, as honourable members know, two major political and military matters in South East Asia before the Cabinet in recent months. They are the British decision to limit its role east of Suez and the situation in Vietnam. The Government has had these great and serious matters under continuous review and has been having a close exchange of views with our allies and friends. I have today to inform the House of certain decisions the Government has taken on the most immediate and the most pressing of these two issues; that is, the situation in Vietnam.

Before dealing with this in some detail, may I refer briefly to the British Government's plans to reduce in stages, Britain's military presence in Malaysia-Singapore. This has to be seen against the background of our own judgment that security and stability in South East Asia are of first importance for Australia and we recognise the need to act positively to maintain that security and stability and also to assist in the development of the region.

Consultations with our allies and friends in South East Asia on these matters are continuing. My colleagues and I have just

had the benefit of discussions here in Canberra with the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr Holyoake. I am happy to say there is a close identity of views with New Zealand on our common strategic interests in South East Asia. There is much still to be done, however, to shape a long-term programme, in concert with friendly and interested governments, to the changes which will follow from the British land withdrawal from the Malaysia-Singapore region. This will take some time, because the pace is not set by one nation alone, but by several, each with a different set of problems.

In the meantime, our immediate pre-occupation is with Vietnam. This is the most urgent of our current external problems, and it is basic to all our aspirations for security in Asia. It is in Vietnam that aggressive Communist pressure—the greatest political danger in Asia today—is most severe and direct, and it is in this area that we must, for the time being, concentrate much of our defence effort and resources. There the tide of Communist expansion is being checked and turned. But, with no sign as yet emerging that the North Vietnamese are ready to negotiate, it is the view of our allies and ourselves that the military pressure must be sustained

and indeed increased if we are to secure even more decisive results in the field—results which might lead North Vietnam to negotiations.

There have been recent visits by Ministers to Vietnam and to the United States, including my own visit to Washington last June when I had detailed discussions with President Johnson, Mr McNamara, Mr Rusk and various military authorities, on the outlook in Vietnam. The President sent two special envoys to this country—Mr Clifford and General Maxwell Taylor—who gave us a valuable survey of progress being made and of likely trends. Theirs was a range of visits to other countries allied in Vietnam.

As I said earlier, Mr Holyoake has been here for on the spot talks. Since then, the Minister for External Affairs (Mr Hasluck) has had discussions with President Johnson and other senior members of the Administration in Washington in the last week or so. From all these exchanges the Government has had the best information and the most considered assessments to add to its own. These have strengthened the Government's confidence that its decisions on our commitment in Vietnam have been soundly based, and they have confirmed that we are making significant progress. There can be no question of our determination to pursue our efforts through to the end until we have achieved our objective—peace and security for South Vietnam and South East Asia. I am confident the majority of the Australian people will continue to give their support to this policy and will want us to make a measured contribution which will give effective support to the allied effort.

The public debate on Vietnam goes on in various forms here and abroad and, because it does, I want to re-state very briefly why we are there and why we must continue to honour our commitment to support South Vietnam. Let me repeat, in simple terms, why we are in Vietnam. We are there because we believe in the right of people to be free. We are there because we responded to an appeal for aid against aggression. We are there because security and stability in South East Asia are vital to our own security and stability. We are there because we want peace, not war, and independence, not serfdom, to be the lot of the peoples of Asia. We are there because

we do not believe that our great Pacific partner, the United States, should stand alone for freedom. We will continue to be there while the aggression persists because, as a free and independent nation, we cannot honourably do otherwise.

There are, from time to time, charges—all unwarranted and quite baseless—that the Government seeks only a military solution, that it is determined to win in the firing-line and that this is our only objective. I say this: We are determined, and so are our allies, that we will not be defeated in the firing-line. Fortunately there is no real risk that we can be. The military situation has been improving steadily, and if we sustain our progress we are daily securing the time and enlarging the opportunity for a response by Hanoi to the repeated offers to negotiate for peace, free of conditions, with honour and regard for the rights of the South Vietnamese people.

In Manila last year, South Vietnam and its allies, including Australia, pledged themselves to continue to resist aggression until it ceased and, at the same time, to seek earnestly, by every means, a just and lasting peace. This has been the consistent position of the United States, the Australian Government and the other allies in Vietnam, and it remains our hope that a political rather than a military solution will be found. We remain, as we have been at all times, flexible so that even the faintest prospect of peace talks can be encouraged. We have on several occasions suggested that the Geneva Agreement of 1954 might provide a suitable basis. There may be other ways. The allies are ready to talk about them if they open up and to keep on taking initiatives themselves.

But the North Vietnamese leaders have turned down every approach, public and private. They have done no more than declare that talks 'could be' or 'might be' held if the United States stopped bombing North Vietnam unconditionally, unilaterally and permanently. But having said that, the North Vietnamese leaders have not said that they would then enter into talks. But they have made it clear that even if talks did begin they would keep up their own military effort. So we must press on with our action in Vietnam to ensure that the people of South Vietnam shall not be conquered by aggression and shall have the

right to choose their own way of life and their own form of government. This was our first and only military objective; it remains our only military objective.

It is easy to suggest that allied strategy in this area is dominated by an exaggerated fear of Communism, but there is no evidence that Communist forces in South East Asia have given up their revolutionary drive. The South Vietnamese people could not stand on their own against a co-ordinated Communist penetration. Our recent assessments confirm our judgment that if South Vietnam fell to a Communist system of government, Communist pressures against the neighbouring States would continue, and in all probability would increase. North Vietnamese regular forces have already been identified in Laos and guerillas trained in North Vietnam are already operating in North East Thailand. The independence and achievements of the countries of this region would be at risk if aggression succeeded in South Vietnam.

I do not think we should ever lose sight of the fact that this war in Vietnam is a limited war—it is not being fought on the pattern of declared wars of the past, where all the stops were out and a patriotic fervour and a face to face challenge of survival were like battalions in action on the home front. It is far away in personal terms, but not nearly as far as the battlefields of the Middle East or Europe. It is ugly—what war isn't?—and it is prolonged. Yet Australian forces fighting there are achieving two immediate results. They are helping to hold the aggressor in check and they are giving the South Vietnamese security and specific aid for the betterment of their country. They are also manning a front line of freedom for all of South East Asia.

The recent elections bear witness to South Vietnam's constitutional and political advancement. The economic and social progress under the South Vietnamese Government's Revolutionary Development Programme is good. Australia has contributed more than \$12m in non-military aid and is spending \$2.2m more this financial year. Our civilian training programme, under which more than 300 Vietnamese have come to Australia, will continue. We are assisting in other major projects in Vietnam,

including water supply and technical aid for schools. Our three surgical teams continue to do splendid work. None of this could be permanent if the military shield were not wide and strong, and the wider and stronger it is, the better the progress of the military campaign and the civil programmes will be.

To that end, therefore—with increasing progress in mind—the Republic of Vietnam and its allies have been conferring on what the situation may require. Each government, with the benefit of the discussions which have taken place, will make its individual decision. Already some of us have decided to commit additional forces at this time so that effort may be increased and so that the military initiative that has been won can be sustained and the pace of political, economic and other development quickened. The United States has already announced that it will add some 45,000 men—nineteen battalions—to the total of 460,000 it has deployed in Vietnam. Today the New Zealand Prime Minister has announced on behalf of his Government New Zealand's increase—in the form of an additional infantry company. Other allied governments are considering what more they can do. For their part the South Vietnamese are to increase their forces by some 60,000 men.

The Australian Government has therefore decided, after consultation with our allies, to increase the Australian forces in Vietnam, and I now set out for the information of the House how this will be done. An additional battalion group with helicopter support will be provided from Australia for the Task Force. This third battalion group, which will be made available in November/December, will have the effect of almost doubling the offensive capability of the force and adding considerably to its operational effectiveness. A tank squadron—about 250 men of all ranks—will be made available. With their mobility and powerful sustained fire power, our medium Centurion tanks will provide better support and protection for the force. Additional helicopters with crews and servicing personnel will be added to the Iroquois squadron to provide the Task Force with more tactical mobility. A small number of Skyhawk pilots and a maintenance element

will be made available on loan for operational service with the United States Marines in South Vietnam. An additional engineer construction unit will be provided to undertake, for a limited period, specific works in the Task Force area. The establishments of headquarters and units will be increased by some 125 all ranks because of operational needs in the area.

These additions will raise the numbers of the Australian force in Vietnam from 6,300 to over 8,000 men, and will make them much more effective as a balanced force. The Government has been able to do this because of the steady expansion in the defence forces over the last few years by increased recruiting and by national service. Australia has now the most powerful and effective defence forces it has ever had short of war-time mobilisation. The Government is able to undertake these additional commitments in Vietnam without detracting from the strength and readiness of the forces deployed elsewhere in South East Asia. Our forces already in Vietnam have acquitted themselves superbly well. We have units from all three Services in the theatre and they have earned the highest praise from our United States, South Vietnamese and other allies.

In Phuoc Tuy province, for instance, which has been a Vietcong stronghold for many years, the Australian Task Force has been confronted with a highly mobile infantry force, well trained and equipped

with good quality weapons. Since our forces were deployed in this area in June 1966, they have established a high degree of security in the province, and have opened up strategic communication routes. Altogether this force has been in over sixty major operations since June 1966. In addition, our air and naval units have played a very useful role in support of overall allied operations.

I believe that those who have served, and are serving, including their parents and families, are keenly aware of the issues at stake in Vietnam and know that Australia has 'to be there', with the same high courage, as Australia has been in other and wider wars, in the cause of freedom. The young national servicemen, who have responded magnificently to the grave tasks that have fallen to them, have identified themselves so completely with our regular soldiers that there is no discernible difference. They have clearly shown their recognition that they are performing a national duty. They are Australian soldiers, and I am sure they would not have it otherwise. I am sure, too, that this House will be ready to pay all our fighting men, regulars and national servicemen alike—the soldiers, sailors and airmen of Australia, serving in Vietnam—the honour that is their due, and that this House will support the additional contribution to their strength that I have now announced on behalf of the Government.