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PRIME MINISTER : You have all had copies of the statement, so there is no point in reading it over to you, so here I am. What would you like to ask about it?

Q : Can you tell us what lay behind the President's statement. Any official or unofficial advice as to why he made this decision?

PM: Nothing other than would appear on the surface of it that he does hope that this will lead Hanoi to start entering into peace negotiations.

Q. Is there anything to indicate that Hanoi might?

PM: Nothing that I have seen, but it is after all, quite a gesture on the part of the United States.

Q. At what stage were you informed, Sir, of the US plans for de-escalation?

PM: Yesterday.

Q. After you returned from New Zealand.

PM: Yes. They were trying to get in touch with New Zealand but they missed me.

Q. Did you see a full draft of this speech yesterday, Sir?

PM: No, the State Department just sent out all the significant points that were to be covered but not the draft of the speech. No.

Q. Did that include his decision not to seek re-election?

PM: No.

Q. You learnt of this today?

PM: Yes.

Q. What is your reaction to that, Sir?

PM: Well I have got a brief statement that I have written out, but it is not yet typed, but I could have it typed and circulated. Here it is :

"I do not think it proper to comment on the decision taken by President Johnson not to seek re-election, other than to say that we in Australia will always remember with gratitude the warmth and special consideration which he has shown to us during his Presidency.

PM (Contd.) "He has had to bear immense burdens and make momentous decisions and carry the responsibility for those decisions and I believe he has made them on the basis of what he sincerely believed to be right, and to the ultimate benefit of freedom inside the United States and outside that country. He is a great man."

Q. You are satisfied, Mr Prime Minister, that this decision will hold and he won't go back on it?

PM: On reading the words that he used, it seems to me that they come as close as it is possible to come to the words the previous American President used - who was it - Sherman, I think: "I won't run, and if I am elected, I won't serve". It seemed to me that

Q. It's final?

PM: Well, I can only go on the words that he used, but they seemed to me to be very final words

Q. Except for the reason he gave. The one reason I heard he gave was that he was so busy conducting the war in Viet Nam that he didn't have time to run an election campaign, which did seem to leave the door open a little bit for a draught.

(Interjection) He said at a press conference afterwards - it was on our four o'clock news - that the decision was irrevocable.

PM: I can't comment other than on the words that he used and they seem to me to be perfectly finite words.

Q. Mr Prime Minister, in your statement, you point out where this statement of President Johnson's is consistent with past American statements. In fact, this is an entirely different break in policy as far as we are concerned. They have virtually unconditionally elected to cease the bombing. Did this particular move catch you by surprise or were you expecting it from the political winds?

PM: Now, let's analyse a little what you say before I answer it, if you don't mind....

Q. To put it more simply, Sir, were you advised in advance of this major change of policy?

PM: I was told yesterday of the points that were covered in the President's speech of today. If you will have read the text of the President's speech, he presents this as an advance on his San Antonio speech. In the San Antonio speech, he said: "We are prepared to stop the bombing of North Viet Nam as soon as we have an indication that North Viet Nam will enter into negotiations as a result". He has gone further than that, one step further than that by now saying, "Well, we will stop the bombing of most of North Viet Nam, even though we haven't got a previous indication that Hanoi will enter into peace negotiations, but we call on Ho Chi Minh to respond to this, and we call on the Co-Chairmen to ask Hanoi to respond to it." It is a further step.

Q. You wouldn't call it a major change, then?

PM: Well, I can only present to you the position as it is offered to Hanoi in the initial statement: "We will stop bombing altogether as soon as you give us an indication that if we do, we will enter into negotiations." Then that statement shortly afterwards is expanded by another statement saying, "Of course, if we do this and we expect to enter into peace negotiations, we don't expect the North to take military advantage of it in a great build-up." But it would be reasonable to expect them to maintain the forces they have got there. This is a further step forward in that he is now not ceasing bombing, but ceasing bombing on a considerable area....

Q. Less ruthless, shall we say?

PM: Well, it is closer to the battle area and more designed obviously to hinder flows of men and materials directly to the North where the fighting is taking place. But he is taking that extra step.

Q. He also says, Sir, just to sort of get back to this :
"This is the first step in a series of de-escalating the war"....

PM: He says it may be the first step in a series of de-escalations.....

Q. We don't have the full text....

PM:and he hopes it will be the first step.

Q. But it is a step towards de-escalation. This is the important break I was talking about. There have been a series of escalations - military escalations - and this is the first positive and recognisable military de-escalation as distinct from statements of what we would do or could do. They are actually doing something. Did that particular action take you by surprise?

PM: You are claiming that previous bombing pauses which have taken place are not to be described as de-escalations because you know that America has stopped previously, and you wouldn't regard that as being a de-escalation?

Q. They didn't call it that at the time.

PM: No, but they did stop it. I think you should read the actual text of the statement which is that he hopes that this will lead to rapid peace talks and that they in turn will lead to increased de-escalation.

Q : On this point - this is "iffy" of course - if nothing happened quickly, would you want the bombing to start again, because you say "We must all hope that this response is forthcoming quickly"

PM: Well we hope the response is forthcoming quickly because we hope that the peace talks will begin which is what we constantly wanted.

Q. If nothing happens?

PM: Well, I wouldn't know.

Q. Will this make any difference to the talks ANZUS and SEATO are having?

PM: I would think not. I would think it would have no bearing on them at all.

Q. Sir, have you had any impression from America that if this doesn't lead to de-escalation, it doesn't work out the way the President hoped, it will resume bombing?

PM: I have only got the text of the President's speech and the points which were covered, and they don't extend into that area.

Q. Sir, the request in the past to be kept informed of any major change in policy in Viet Nam and the fact that your two Ministers on Tuesday and Thursday were obviously placed in the position that they went right on a limb on the thing, are there going to be any approaches that we be informed of these things in the future?

PM: Well, I think we have consistently made it clear, indeed as late as the Governor-General's Speech, where it was said in unequivocal language that we would support any moves which were designed to lead to the opening of peace talks, and we expect those peace talks to lead to a real peace which, indeed, is clear. By "peace", I mean a just and enduring peace, and self-determination for the Vietnamese - a real peace. Indeed, the President's statement this time indicates that this is what is being desired, and not something which he describes in his statement as a fake peace. Well we have consistently indicated that we would support those kinds of moves, and I think this is a move along that path.

Q. Mr Prime Minister, doesn't it seem that the close consultation that we have always been told this Government has with the American Government wasn't in evidence this time?

PM: I told you when we were informed of the points which were to be covered in the American speech, they weren't discussed with us before that time; but as I have pointed out, we have made it perfectly clear that we were prepared to support efforts to reach a genuine peace. This is a step further than the San Antonio speech. It is a step further. The San Antonio speech was speaking of ceasing bombing altogether, which I think you mentioned. This one mentions ceasing bombing in the highly populated areas, the food-producing areas, but retains it on the approaches to the military field, and it is therefore a cessation of bombing on significant areas of Viet Nam - well, I have put it in this statement.

Q. Prime Minister, are you likely to discuss this directly by telephone or any other way with Mr Johnson to get to his reasoning? You have indicated you only have the text of his speech as we have probably had it.

PM: Yes, well...

Q. I thought you would probably want to know the reasons behind....

PM: Well the reasoning behind it, I think, appears quite clearly in the speech itself. He does hope that this will lead to a reaction from Hanoi, and that it will lead to the opening of peace talks. He expresses in his speech the hope that he will get a reaction from Hanoi in response to this gesture and that then the question could be open for discussion as to whether the areas that were being still to be bombed for military purposes could be also taken away from bombing, provided certain arrangements were made. And this is the de-escalation of which you were talking...

Q. Do you feel there is a necessity to ring him or to get our Ambassador in Washington to give you a background report or briefing on this?

PM: Well I don't think it is necessary because I think the indication is there. When the State Department people told me the points that were to be covered, they indicated to me that this was a hope - in the hope that this sort of thing would follow.

Q. I presume you will discuss it with Dean Rusk during your talks with him later in the week, anyway?

PM: I wouldn't necessarily say that I would or that I wouldn't. I will be discussing a whole range of matters with Dean Rusk.

Q. You will have some background material from our Embassy in Washington, Sir, won't you, before tomorrow's Parliament?

PM: Well, we have had some background material from Waller. You can't go much further, I don't think, than what I have told you. That is the background material and the background thinking to it.

Q. What about the President's health? Do you know anything about that?

PM: No, but Waller's views were the same as mine - there was a question I was asked earlier as to the definiteness of this announcement of not standing - and Waller's views were that he believed it was quite definite. Since then, there has been another thing I understand.

Q. Sir, there are two alternatives in this - either the North Vietnamese have indicated something or the Americans have made a definite change. You have indicated that this is a new step.

PM: I indicated they had gone one step further. Yes.

Q. It's about six weeks since I think Mr Rusk finally rejected the last Vietnamese statement....

PM: I don't know which one you are talking about, John.

Q. It's about six weeks. Now, what is the new factor as you see it in the last six weeks which has influenced the President to make this, what we see as a new step?

PM: I'm sorry, John, I don't know the statement of Rusk that you are talking about, but it was, I think, last August that the San Antonio speech was

Q. Yes, then late in December, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister said something - If you stop bombing, we'll talk.

PM: Did he?

Q. And it took until 14th February to investigate it and say that it wasn't bona fide. Now, in the six weeks since, we have a new factor to make a new step?

PM: I don't have any information - I haven't been given any by the External Affairs Department that the North Vietnamese have ever made the statement: You stop bombing and we will talk. Rather I thought the statements had been: Unless bombing is stopped, we won't talk.

Q. Sir, you have indicated that you are quite happy with this. Some of your Ministers in the past have strongly opposed any such move on the grounds.....as recently as last Thursday, the Defence Minister, Mr Fairhall, talking about bombing North Viet Nam at large said that the only thing that made North Viet Nam as a whole different from the demilitarized zone or Laos and Cambodia which were safe havens for the North Viet Nam troops, was the bombing at large of North Viet Nam. Have you discussed this with them? Are their feelings still the same? Are they still opposed to this?

PM: I haven't discussed the statement with Mr Fairhall. If you look at practically everything I have said on this matter, either in the Higgins by-election or in radio and television appearances, "Four Corners" and things of this kind, or indeed again, in the Governor-General's speech, or in New Zealand, you will see a consistent thread, I think, that we don't to destroy North Viet Nam, we don't want to destroy the North Vietnamese Government. We see the value of bombing as to try and hamper and hinder the flow of troops and materials from the North to the South and this is the significance we attach to it. Well that again, as this statement indicates, is now going to be sought to be done by bombing a smaller area than it was before. That is still designed to try to prevent - and we never claimed it did prevent - but to make it difficult, to hamper the flow of men and materials, while at the same time freeing the large areas further north from the danger of attack in the hope that that will lead to a positive response from Hanoi. Then it could go step by step if that happened. I think that was the reasoning behind it.

Q. Sir, could you tell me, since you were informed yesterday, which Ministers have you discussed this with? Have you talked to Mr Hasluck?

PM: Well, I have been incable communication with Mr Hasluck in New Zealand. I had a word with Gordon Freeth, the acting Minister here, and with a number of officials, and with the Deputy Prime Minister.

Q. Have you spoken to any other Prime Ministers like Mr Holyoake?

PM: No.

Q. Sir, how soon do you expect a positive response from Hanoi? What would you call a reasonable thing?

PM: I couldn't guess. I wouldn't guess.

Q. Mr Prime Minister how big do you see this move?

PM: I think it ought to be able to be regarded as a real test of whether North Viet Nam is prepared to start talking or not.

Q. Would you go further than that?

PM: I think that is a pretty big thing, isn't it?

Q. Do you think there have been steps to peace on an equal scale?

PM: I think perhaps that this is the greatest concession the Americans have made. There have been concessions, but following on from the thing held out at San Antonio, and the President's speech itself, when you read it all in with the San Antonio one, this is a further concession than was offered in the San Antonio speech.

Q. Mr Prime Minister, could you illuminate the section of the President's statement on troops? Could you call his attitude now one of having a holding operation?

PM: No, I don't think I would. I think he has indicated a resolve to continue the struggle, and indeed, a resolve to build up the South Vietnamese armed forces, and expect them with the equipment which the United States will provide, to take an even bigger part, to provide some reinforcements from the United States itself, and to continue the struggle - I have forgotten the words he used, but the resolve is completely unweakened.

Q. This is directly related to the Tet offensive?

PM: I have seen no indication of it. I can only tell you what I have been told and what I believe to be the reason behind it. I think the reason behind it is : All right. We will make this further concession. We will go this extra mile.

Q. Do you think the New Hampshire primaries may have had anything to do with it?

PM: Well, would they have anything to do with it if he wasn't go to stand for President again?

Q. Does this leave you in the position that you need to clarify your thinking on the thing. Obviously, yours consisted of a series of impressions as you have told us today.

PM: My thinking of a series of impressions on what?

Q. On his official statement and the slight background given to you by the State Department. Will this speed up any intention on your part to go to the States to talk with him and his authorities? Or will you rely on Mr Rusk here?

PM: Well, I will be talking to Mr Rusk here. I was proposing to go to the States quite soon for a rush trip, but they will be engaged in all kinds of various political activities. Now that President Johnson has indicated that he will not be standing again, I will have to consider whether it might not better to do it later.

Q. Could you indicate when you say 'soon' Sir, what your original plans were?

PM: Well, they were pretty tentative.

Q. You will wait for a new President, then?

PM: Well, this is the sort of thing I said I would have to take into consideration. I want to think about it.

Q. Otherwise it could be a trip which.....

PM: Well, there are all sorts of considerations

Q. In view of the fact that this very latest step was taken without consultation with the Australian Government, despite assurances we had in 1966 after the Honolulu Conference, can we take this as official acknowledgment now that the war has passed out of our hands without even going through the pretence of influencing the course of the war here?

PM: Well, I suppose anybody is at liberty to take anything at any time in any way they like. Are you asking me the way I take it or you asking me the way you can take it?

Q. The Government.

PM: Well, let me make these points. This is not anything which in any way requires any increased contributions from Australia. This is not something which requires Australia to make some additional effort at all. In those kind of circumstances, I have no doubt whatever that full consultations would take place. I don't expect them to take place in other circumstances.....if anyone wants to interpret that.... This is a further attempt and a further step to see whether they can bring about talks while continuing the struggle in South Viet Nam, whether they can bring about talks leading to a genuine peace. We have consistently said that we would support such attempts.

Q. Have we said what we think is a genuine peace?

PM: Yes, we have. I can't remember the words, but a just and enduring peace that really gives the people of South Viet Nam the opportunity to make freedom of choice. That is it by and large. You will find this firm statement in the Governor-General's Speech, I think

Q. On this point of consultation, Mr Prime Minister, are you then satisfied with the lack of consultation and warning that the Australian Government was given?

PM: I thought I had answered that before in the last question, indicating that we would support moves leading towards it (peace). In the Governor-General's Speech, we said we seek a just and lasting peace based on those objectives. I will read you the whole passage, because it ties in with something you said, Frank :

"My Government believes that the South Vietnamese people should retain the elementary right to determine their own future in their own way and will, besides the effective military assistance it is rendering to this end, continue to provide economic and civil aid to South Viet Nam.

In doing this, my Government desires neither the destruction of North Viet Nam, nor the overthrow of the Government of North Viet Nam but merely the cessation of aggression against the people of South Viet Nam so that those people may, by the exercise of a franchise they have shown they know how to exercise even under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances, choose their own form of government. We seek a just and lasting peace based on these objectives. We have supported and will support every effort for negotiation of such a peace."

Q. Even in the better conditions of peace, as we state them, what are the pre-conditions as you see them for peace talks? What are the pre-conditions before we get into talks? Are there any?

PM: Well, I imagine a pre-condition is that the Government of North Viet Nam indicates that they are prepared to enter into peace talks.

Q. A cease-fire?

PM: This seems to be the objective, doesn't it? I mean, this is the objective, to enter into peace talks. This has been, all the time. The United States has been saying, "Well, we'll try this. We'll try that to see whether it results in an indication that the North Vietnamese will begin to talk" Not necessarily before the fighting finishes, but begin to talk,

Q. The diplomatic pressure is obviously on them now. There will be some sort of an answer, apparently. If we presume there will be some sort of an answer, I am looking for a minimum pre-condition that we would regard as acceptable. Just a willingness to enter talks?

PM: Well, this is what. . . .

Q. Will we be taking any diplomatic initiative to urge Britain to follow the President's request to call a meeting, to get moving?

PM: To call Britain and Russia to get on to Ho Chi Minh?

Q. Are we going to press Britain along on this?

PM: I wouldn't comment on that at this stage.

Q. What is the difference between this bombing pause and the previous bombing pause? This has been presented as a dramatic move by the US. It has been presented in rather dramatic circumstances with rather dramatic surrounds. But is it essentially any different from the previous bombing pauses?

PM: Well, I think one has to make one's own mind up about this, but previously, there have been sort of bombing pauses - this is not presented as a bombing pause essentially - but there have been bombing pauses in the sort of hope that we would see what happened. Now, the next step was that the President - I am sorry to go over the same ground again - made the San Antonio speech in which he said, "We'll stop bombing if you will start talking and not take great military advantage of our stopping bombing" and that didn't seem to elicit any response. Then a number of people around the world said, "Well, give it a go anyway. Stop the bombing and we think they will probably talk if you do. Give them an opportunity to talk. They said they wouldn't talk if you didn't." This is a stopping of bombing except for the direct military support which is needed. Well, as I said before, it will test whether this does lead to indications of their willingness to enter into talks.

Q. This also has an element of tick-tacking involved in it. "We'll do this and we expect some gesture on your part and we will do something else." This wasn't apparent in the earlier bombing pauses.

PM: This word "tick-tacking" what do you mean by that? I think it is a sort of indication. All right. Here's a real gesture. Does it elicit any response? If it elicits a response, then we can talk about the next step downwards, at the same time as we are talking about how to achieve a just and enduring peace. The whole thing, I think, is now waiting to see what sort of a response it elicits.

Q. Just on this point of consultations, Sir. Is the point you are making because we have said we support any steps towards peace, there is no need for the United States to come to us and say "We are going to do this because we see this as a step towards peace"?

PM: Well, I was endeavouring to indicate that the United States in relation to all the things we have said about supporting steps towards peace and supporting the previous San Antonio speech of the President, might have thought it was essential for long-term prior consultations had there been any alteration the other way, had there been any alteration in continuing their resolve on the ground in South Viet Nam, altering their approach there, which there is no indication of at all.

Q. It is just that in the reassessment that went on, one would have thought they would have said to the other nations fighting: "What are your views as to the conduct of the war and how it is going?" before they made the unilateral decision.

Q. Particularly in the light of the fact that our Government, the Australian Government has consistently claimed that one of the motives in bombing was to save Australian lives.

PM: Well, the bombing is still going on in the areas where there is a military build-up - put it this way, the bottlenecks, the trails along which men and munitions have been flowing down to the south, and that is why the same approach you have just said, quite properly, is the Australian Government's approach, is why the American President said "I couldn't in all conscience prevent that part of the bombing" because it would tend to help our people being killed.

Q. Sir, in the last paragraph of your statement today you talked about not leaving allied troops at too great a ^{military} disadvantage. Isn't this an admission that the cessation that is being allowed will do just that?

PM: I'll do just what?

Q. Leave our troops at some disadvantage...

PM: Ch. You read out my statement which said this is not leaving our troops at too great a disadvantage and then suggested my statement was saying it did just that, that it did leave them at too great a military disadvantage. It doesn't. But clearly there would be some military loss because you are not bombing arms factories, barracks and roads and bridges further north, so there would be some diminution of the effort in that direction, and that, I think, indicates that this is a real gesture on the part of the United States.

Q. Would it seem, Sir, if this gesture does succeed, even more Australian lives will be saved?

PM: You mean if it moves step by step long term, and you reach the logical goal of having a real peace which gives them a chance, well you don't have people killed when you reach a real peace.

Q. You don't see it in any way what the Americans have done about bombing as a public admission that their bombing policy has failed?

PM: I don't think it is a public admission at all. I think it is a genuine attempt, as the President has said, to make this move in the hope that it will lead to Hanoi entering into these talks whereas previously, and this is the significant change that we've been talking about, he has said we would like an indication of entering into peace talks before we make the next move. Now that is a significant change indeed.

Q. Do you propose a debate on any statement you might make on this to the House?

PM: I don't believe I would be proposing a debate. I will probably make a statement to Parliament, but then it is open to debate....

Q. You will make a further statement tomorrow?

PM: I think that would be the reasonable thing to do.

Q. The way will then be open for the Opposition to reply?

PM: Well, there could be a debate on this. Yes.

Q. Has the Foreign Affairs debate finished?

PM: Well, I have been away. I haven't caught up with it. We only got back yesterday afternoon. I had to do a little work yesterday after we got back and I haven't had time to get round to.....

Q. It was adjourned, Sir, on the motion of Mr Giles.

Q: Will you have an early Cabinet meeting to present this to Cabinet?

PM: Well, we will be having a Cabinet tomorrow in the normal way, but what this would call for is not a Cabinet discussion?

Q. Sir, personally, do you feel optimistic about the outcome of this?

PM: Oh, I am not going to speculate on the future. Sorry, I just can't speculate on this one .

Q. Can you say anything now about the F111? Remember you were asked yesterday and you said

PM: No, I'm sorry I can't. But Mr Fairhall is coming up here. He will probably be able to say something about it. He has indicated to me that he will be getting reports from the United States authorities on whatever it was that happened. Nobody seems to be quite sure yet what it was.

Thank you.
