

SAIGON

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,  
MR. JOHN GORTON

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9 JUNE 1968

Q. Mr. Gorton you haven't been here very long, Sir, but what is your assessment of the military situation in Vietnam?

PM. I don't believe I'm competent to make a military assessment, I'm not a military man. We get assessments given to us by our military advisers and I'm certainly no trained strategist nor a trained tactician, but there is one thing I do believe is quite certain, and that is the spirit and morale of our Australian troops here is as high as I have ever seen in any body of troops anywhere.

Q. Sir, you were quoted as saying that you felt that news reports of the situation in Saigon had been exaggerated; can you tell me what areas of Saigon and Cholon you have seen?

PM. All I can tell you is that flying in, both myself and I think those who were with me, had expected to see from the air much greater areas of devastation than were, in fact, apparent.

Q. Have you offered, or been asked, for any more Australian troops for Vietnam?

PM. The answer to both those questions is no.

Q. Excellency, as you have noticed about the general situation in Vietnam, do you think that the trend of this situation will turn towards peace or towards an escalation of the war?

PM. What we all hope for is a peace which will bring to the people of South Vietnam a just, enduring and lasting peace under which they can elect their own Government free from fear and live under that Government free from fear. This is the peace, the objective sought as I understand all the allies agreed at the Manila Conference.

Q. Excellency, do you think that the Americans will withdraw from Vietnam? In other words, will give up in Vietnam?

PM. I'm not qualified to speak for the Americans but the American President I understand has made this situation perfectly clear.

Q. Mr. Gorton, the Australian 1st Battalion in 1965 took far less casualties than the Australian 1st Battalion is now taking in the same areas. It's the Australian 1st Battalion in War Zone "D" now fighting N. V. A. units which are better equipped and are deeper entrenched in War Zone "D". How can you then refer to military progress by the Australian Task Force as you have done elsewhere in the tour?

PM. I'd like you to point out where I've referred to military progress by the Australian Task Force. What I have said and what I repeat is that the spirit and morale of the Australian troops are as good as I have seen in any body of troops anywhere. But since you have raised the question, I understand from our Australian military advisers, that the Battalion has played a significant part in setting itself across one of the main supply routes of Vietcong units down here and has caused so much discomfort to the enemy that it has led to attacks upon that Battalion in considerable force, and attacks which were repulsed with, and I speak from memory, losses to the enemy of some 45 to 55 men and a considerable number of arms. I think that is an indication of capacity and progress of the Australian Force as far as the Australian Forces are concerned. I just want to make it perfectly clear that the progress and capacity of the Australian military forces are not to be impugned while in my presence. At least I won't accept it.