

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. J. G. GORTON, M.P.

ON

CAMBODIA

(Ministerial Statement)

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 5 May 1970]

Mr GORTON (Higgins — Prime Minister)—by leave—For some years North Vietnamese regular forces, and other forces controlled by North Vietnam, have been withdrawing across the Cambodian border after battles in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese have built, in Cambodia, base camps in which their forces could rest, refit, regroup, and be prepared for further military action against allied troops in South Vietnam.

This military disadvantage was endured with great forbearance by United States and South Vietnamese forces—for even though the neutrality of Cambodia was being violated by the Communists, the Allies continued to hope that the protests of the Cambodian Government might lead to a cessation of the North Vietnamese invasion. This was a vain hope and since the displacement of the Sihanouk Government by the Lon Nol Government in Cambodia, North Vietnamese and forces controlled by them have extended and expanded their invasion of Cambodia's neutrality.

There has been a gradually increasing violation of this neutrality—a violation which was grossly wrong in itself—which was carried out by a nation which had signed the Geneva Agreement to respect Cambodia's neutrality—and which increasingly gave a military advantage to the enemy and posed growing military danger to Allied forces in South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese have extended westward from the bases they had been occupying. They have attacked, in Cambodia, administration centres, communications and populated areas in Eastern and South Eastern Cambodia. And along with this increasingly cynical and increasingly overt invasion, they have taken steps designed to create a zone in Cambodia, occupied by them, along virtually the entire length of the South Vietnamese border with Cambodia. As President Nixon pointed out, they have embarked on a programme to make Cambodia a vast enemy staging area, and a springboard for attacks on South Vietnam along 600 miles of frontier.

They have in fact begun a wider invasion, and embarked on a course which poses greater military dangers to Allied forces than before. This new military threat, increased in gravity, has led to South Vietnamese and United States forces taking action to protect themselves by crossing the border into Cambodian Territory occupied by the North Vietnamese. The decision, reached by the President of the United States, was taken on operational military grounds and was designed to protect the lives of Allied servicemen.

Those who condemn this decision, as the Government does not, must either argue that there has not been an increased threat to Allied forces as a result of North Vietnamese action—and this is scarcely arguable or tenable—or they must hold that it

does not matter whether there has been an increased threat or not—that regardless of increased danger Allied forces should be left in that danger from the flank and should not try to prevent it. We do not accept this.

Our own Australian forces are not engaged in this operation and I see no prospect that they will be. But the effect of the operation could well be to make all Allied forces in South Vietnam, including our own, more safe. Our own objective for Cambodia is known. We wish to see a neutral Cambodia—a country which is not used by anyone as a base or a battleground; a country which enjoys in truth that freedom from interference, that real neutrality which it was guaranteed under the Geneva Agreement and which was breached by North Vietnam.

We will try by diplomatic means to bring this about—and to bring about a method of international inspection designed to ensure that respect for the neutrality of Cambodia is real and is continuing. For let me make this clear. We do seek a Cambodia whose neutrality is respected in fact and in truth. We do not seek a Cambodia which is called neutral but which is occupied in greater or lesser part by North Vietnam. For this would be a continuance of the pretence which has prevailed. It would not mean that the neutrality of Cambodia was real. And it would mean that South Vietnam was endangered.

In the Government's view this is the situation. The neutrality of Cambodia has been consistently and progressively violated by North Vietnam. The increasing tempo of the violation has posed an increasingly grave military threat to the lives of Allied servicemen. It has also, by widening and escalating the war, threatened to prolong it, and to delay vietnamisation and to delay the time when Allied forces could be withdrawn.

The action taken by the United States and South Vietnam was action to protect the servicemen against attack by an enemy which was increasingly occupying a neutral nation. We understand the reason for their action and we find it odd that the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Whitlam) should, on behalf of his Party, viciously criticise that action. It is worth noting, Mr Speaker, that

so far as I know not one member of the Opposition, at any time, has criticised the violation of Cambodian neutrality during the last 5 years by the North Vietnamese.

(Honourable members interjecting)—

Mr SPEAKER—Order! I ask honourable members on both sides of the House to come to order. This is an important statement and I believe that the Prime Minister should be given the courtesy of being heard without interruption.

Mr GORTON—There have been no claims that these Communist actions were 'fatefully widening the war' or that their increasing invasion of Cambodia ought to be condemned. There were no fulminations from the Opposition against that violation of neutrality. Those were Communist actions and immune to criticism from the Opposition. But now that counter action has occurred, our Allies are criticised in the Opposition—they, we are told, have widened the war; they, we are told, have engaged in escalation; they are in the wrong now that this has happened.

Sir, such comments I believe are support for the theory that Communist forces should be allowed to operate as and when they like; that they should be excused for invading and occupying neutral countries; and that it is wrong for action to be taken to stop them and that such comments by giving that support, to me, Sir, show a willingness, even a desire, to accept defeat or surrender of Allied forces in South Vietnam.

I can understand—though strongly disagree with but I can understand—those who wish to surrender in Vietnam, and abandon the South Vietnamese, and let aggression succeed. But I cannot understand those who, while the struggle continues, are prepared to subject Allied forces to military threat and to endanger the lives of soldiers in action. We entirely reject this attitude. We will continue to work for a truly neutral Cambodia by all means we can. But we will not excuse our enemies and attack our Allies in our joint endeavours to bring peace and self-government to South Vietnam in the way the Opposition has done.

I present the following paper:

Cambodia—Ministerial Statement, 5 May 1970.