

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. W. McMAHON, M.P.

ON

FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN FORCES IN VIETNAM

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 30 March 1971]

Mr McMAHON (Lowe—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Speaker, the Government has been reviewing the position of Australia's military forces in Vietnam in order to determine what further withdrawal options are open to it, having regard to the security situation and the intentions of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam and of our other major allies. This review follows from the policy stated by the then Prime Minister, now the Minister for Defence (Mr Gorton), in April 1970 when, in announcing the withdrawal of one Army battalion, he said that 'Should the progress of pacification and Vietnamisation succeed as the President (of the United States) hopes and believes that it will, then at some stage during the 12 months period we will consider phasing additional troops into the planned withdrawal'.

During his recent visit to Vietnam, the Minister for Defence had valuable discussions with Vietnamese leaders and with the Commander of United States forces in Vietnam. These consultations have confirmed our assessment that steady improvement is being achieved in the security situation. Many factors have contributed to this improvement. The policy of Vietnamisation, that is, the development of the capability and effectiveness of South Vietnam's armed forces, has produced a much stronger and more cohesive fighting

force. The pacification programme has also achieved notable successes, and its contribution towards improved security in the rural areas has necessitated the enemy concentrating his effort against that programme. These developments, in combination with North Vietnam's manpower problems, have seen a significant decline in enemy-initiated activity over the last 2 years.

An important consequence of these achievements has been that the South Vietnamese have been able to continue their operations in Cambodia against North Vietnamese regular forces. Additionally they were able to initiate and conduct the recent operations against the North Vietnamese supply lines in southern Laos. The effect of these operations so far has been to prevent the enemy mounting large-scale actions inside South Vietnam and thus they have given the South Vietnamese time for the further development of their forces and for strengthening the pacification programme. In a number of key areas within South Vietnam the North Vietnamese have for the present lost the military initiative. The enemy forces are thus being forced to a position of reacting to the South Vietnamese rather than being able to fight at a time and place of their own choosing.

Turning to the overall security of South Vietnam, it is undeniable that there has been satisfactory progress towards the

objective of establishing the circumstances in which South Vietnam can determine its own future. There remain, of course, difficulties which should not be minimised. The North Vietnamese at the Paris talks have remained intransigent. Nothing constructive has been offered by them towards a negotiated settlement. In Vietnam itself there has been some resurgence in Communist terrorism, political agitation, and attacks against lines of communication. These tactics by the Communists, using their remaining infrastructure in the country, will doubtless be employed against the Government and people for some time to come.

In its weighing up of the overall situation, the Government has decided that further reductions of the Australian forces in Vietnam are feasible and desirable. With the agreement of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam, and following consultations with United States military authorities in Saigon, some forces will now be withdrawn. These are:

Selected combat and supporting forces of the Army task force, including the tank squadron, totalling about 650 men;

Royal Australian Navy personnel, about 45 in number, serving with the United States Assault Helicopter Company;

The RAN Clearance Diving Team (clearance of underwater explosives) of 6 personnel;

No. 2 Canberra Bomber Squadron involving 280 men;

Some aircraft of the Caribou transport squadron and about 44 men.

The reductions are therefore to be spread over the 3 Services and will have the effect of reducing the total Australian personnel by about 1,000 men. The Australian forces then remaining in South Vietnam will comprise 6,000 men compared with a peak of 8,000 in 1968-70. All these remaining forces, including the 2-battalion Task Force in Phuoc Tuy, will retain an effective operational capability. The tasks of our forces will continue to change as the Vietnamese territorial forces accept increased operational responsibility. The units and personnel involved in these

reductions will be withdrawn gradually over a period of 4 months to 6 months, commencing in May. This timetable will permit detailed adjustments to be made between the Australian, South Vietnamese, and United States military authorities in relation to the security requirements of the areas involved.

Events in South Vietnam, to which our own fighting men made such a notable contribution, have made these withdrawals possible and they are entirely in accordance with the policy of the Government as announced in Parliament. It must be acknowledged that enemy forces in Indo-China still retain a considerable offensive capability, and there remains in South Vietnam a structure of Vietcong cadres and guerillas which has been long established and whose strength is very difficult to assess. No doubt the Government and forces of the Republic may from time to time suffer military setbacks, and the continuance of the war against aggression will be a heavy burden upon them. But perhaps more than ever before, the Government of the Republic acknowledges that getting on top of the internal threat to security and the development of progressive government in the provinces are tasks best performed by themselves once a sufficient degree of security from massive external attack has been established. Greater confidence now exists. The Vietnamese authorities have developed a variety of programmes which are becoming increasingly effective in bringing better administration in the countryside. The Australian Government will continue to assist the Republic of Vietnam, though the character of our assistance will progressively change. For example, the new Jungle Warfare Training Centre at Nui Dat has just completed its first course. Australian economic and military aid in a variety of forms will continue. We will continue to build houses for members of the Territorial Forces and their families. Other forms of civil aid and civic action will be examined by the Government. As to the future of our forces in Vietnam, the Government will keep the matter under constant review, bearing in mind the security of our own forces and our obligations to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.