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NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLES ON VIETNAM

Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon

Following a series of disclosures in the New York Times of confidential documents belonging to the American Government relating to Vietnam, statements have been made concerning the commitment in 1965 of Australian troops to fight in Vietnam. Many of these have been irresponsible and obviously politically motivated.

Much controversy has centred on the question of whether or not the Australian Government had been requested by the South Vietnamese Government to supply military assistance. It will be clear from what follows that the appropriate request was in fact made and that we did not intend to act unless such a request was made.

Statements to the contrary are demonstrably false.

The matter was referred to the Defence Committee which asked the Secretaries of the Departments of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Defence to study the relevant documents and report to me.

They have been assisted by the officer who was Australian Ambassador to South Vietnam at the time the commitment was made and who handled personally, in Saigon, the exchange of letters following which the combat forces were sent.

It is clear from this study that the Government of the day acted with complete propriety throughout the events leading to the commitment of a battalion to Vietnam and that it faithfully and honestly informed the public of the decisions it had made and the basis on which they were made.

The Prime Minister of the day, Sir Robert Menzies, has already made a public statement which, in the clearest terms, rejects the charges made against his Government and himself. I confirm the accuracy of his statement.

Australia's actions at that time must be seen in perspective and in the context of the worsening situation in South-East Asia.

As I said in a television interview on 18 June, we were in South Vietnam because we felt there was a real danger at that time of the whole of South-East Asia falling to communism. We joined with our friends and allies, the United States, to resist the threat. We wanted the smaller countries of Asia to be able to determine their own future.

It will be remembered too, that this was the period of "confrontation" between Sukarno's Indonesia and Malaysia, and that Australian forces were already involved in Malaysia.

In South Vietnam the military and political situation was close to collapse. North Vietnamese infiltration had increased substantially and there was clear evidence of the presence in the South of formed units of the North Vietnamese regular forces.

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The question of sending a battalion to South Vietnam was under discussion by the Government from December 1964 until the commitment was announced on 29 April 1965.

During this period, the Government was in close and continuing communication with the United States.

Whilst there was a broad identity of view on the gravity of the situation, the decisions taken by the Government during this period were firmly based on its own independent assessments of our national interests.

The Government was considering a significant enlargement of our assistance to South Vietnam which at that stage consisted of a team of military advisers and a flight of RAAF transport aircraft. Our own interests were deeply involved. We had a direct interest in the security of South Vietnam and we had then, as now, obligations under the South-East Asia Treaty.

The Defence Committee and the Chiefs of Staff Committee had each made a close study of what further action Australia could take.

At all stages in the Government's consideration it was known and accepted that if combat troops were offered and were to be sent they would go only "at the invitation or with the consent of" South Vietnam. This was required under article IV of the South-East Asia Treaty to which we were a party.

This was not, as some want to present it, a matter being considered for the first time on the eve of our announcement of a commitment. It was basic throughout.

It should be remembered that in July 1964 the Prime Minister of South Vietnam, then Major-General Nguyen Khanh, in a published letter addressed to the Heads of State of 34 countries, including Australia, had appealed for "all the support you deem possible and opportune in order to help us successfully fight the communist aggression".

And as I have pointed out on another occasion, the Prime Minister of South Vietnam, Mr. Tran Van Huong, in December 1964 in discussion with the Australian Minister for Air, then visiting Vietnam, and the Australian Ambassador, asked for an increased Australian military contribution.

Mr. Huong said the situation was now such that large scale assistance was urgently needed from all free nations "in every form but particularly military".

On 29 April there was an exchange of letters between the Australian Ambassador and the Prime Minister of South Vietnam.

In these letters, the Australian Government offered to send a battalion if one were requested, and the South Vietnamese Government accepted this offer and made its request in terms conforming with the requirements of the South-East Asia Treaty.

Sir Robert Menzies, then Prime Minister, made a statement in the House of Representatives on the same day.

He said we had received this request and that a battalion would be provided for service in South Vietnam.

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He also said the decision that we would be willing to send troops if we received the necessary request from the Government of South Vietnam was made in principle some time before.

He added that there had been close consultation with the Government of the United States.

The South Vietnamese Government also publicly issued a communique on the same day which said, "upon the request of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam, the Government of Australia today approved despatch to Vietnam of an infantry battalion together with logistical support personnel to assist the Republic of Vietnam armed forces in its struggle against aggression..."

Returning to the substance of the matter, there has since been a dramatic improvement in the security and the stability of the general region of South-East Asia. We have contributed to this improvement.

In South Vietnam, communist aggression has been checked and the pacification programme developed and extended.

The Government took the responsible course - a course based on its own assessment - of enlarging the contribution it was already making in South Vietnam on the basis that the military situation required it and the country under aggression asked for it.

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CANBERRA  
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