

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY

The Rt Hon. W. McMAHON, C.H., M.P.
Prime Minister

ON

LONG TERM AID TO BANGLA DESH

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 29 February 1972]

Mr McMAHON (Lowe—Prime Minister)—by leave—Honourable members will recall that on 31st January the Australian Government announced formal recognition of the Government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Government of the new state of Bangla Desh. In announcing recognition, the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr N. H. Bowen) said that, as a nation of 75 million people bordering the Indian Ocean, Bangla Desh was likely to play an increasingly important role in the affairs of South and South East Asia. He also said we looked forward to co-operating with Bangla Desh in various regional organisations, including the Colombo Plan and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. In taking this action, Australia was among the first of the Western and Commonwealth nations to accord recognition, and, I think we can claim, gave the lead to many of our neighbours. We have since followed up this initiative with positive steps in the field of aid to Bangla Desh. On 16th February, less than 3 weeks after we had recognised the new nation, my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, announced the imminent departure of the first sea-cargo of emergency relief aid to be shipped direct to Bangla Desh. During the same weekend, the first trainee under the Colombo Plan to be nominated by Bangla Desh arrived in Australia. He will be followed by many others, as our long term plans to assist Bangla Desh with technical training come to fruition.

At the time the announcement of the direct cargo of relief aid was made, the Minister said that the Government had the long-term needs of Bangla Desh under active consideration. Bangla Desh is one of the most overpopulated and impoverished regions in the world. Its natural resources are few, its secondary industry barely developed and much of what had been established was destroyed during the fighting there. International aid will be required on a large scale, not only to provide immediate relief and repair the damage caused during the war, but also to help in building up this young nation as a viable economic unit. We have also borne in mind the words of the Bangla Desh Minister for Rehabilitation, who said recently in welcoming Australian emergency relief aid: 'He gives twice . . . who gives quickly.' So the Government has been looking to what aid Australia can best provide, to accord with the future long-term needs of Bangla Desh. We have been looking ahead to the next stage, and to longer-term aid programmes. For the next financial year, beginning in just a few months, Australia will provide aid for Bangla Desh totalling \$4m. This will be in addition to the \$2m of aid already in the pipeline. This new amount of \$4m will be for special rehabilitation assistance, for regular aid, including projects and experts, training, and for food aid. It is a special amount which we shall make available to assist Bangla Desh in coping with the extraordinary problems

which will confront it in its early stages of nationhood.

We have been having continuous discussions through our mission in Dacca with the Government of Bangla Desh. Details of the precise forms in which we intend to provide this longer-term aid are being worked out on the basis of the planning priorities of the Bangla Desh Government. These will be announced at appropriate times by my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. I would, however, like to make it clear to the House that the plans for new aid to Bangla Desh which I have just announced are the first stage of Australia's long-term assistance. The ways and means in which this programme is to be and will be developed shall be kept under regular review. Earlier I said that Australia

had taken a further initiative. It is, I point out to the House, that, apart from India, which is Bangla Desh's closest neighbour, Australia is one of the first of those nations which have recognised Bangla Desh to come forward with a commitment of longer-term aid, other than emergency relief. I believe that, as we gave the lead to many nations in recognising Bangla Desh, this action, of announcing plans for longer-term aid may also give a lead to other nations to act similarly. For it is only with the concerted help of friendly countries that Bangla Desh will be enabled to emerge from the problems of her birth in war. Our aim is to help Bangla Desh to take her place as a stable and developing economy which will make a constructive contribution to the South Asian region.