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PRIME MINISTER

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PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO EUROPE

The Prime Minister, Mr. Whitlam, announced today that arrangements were being finalised for him to visit a number of European countries over a period of five weeks in December and January.

Leaving Australia on 14 December, Mr. Whitlam would visit Belgium, Britain and Ireland before Christmas, and thereafter he hoped to visit Malta, Greece, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany. In Brussels he would call on the European Commission. He proposed to take the opportunity afforded by overnight stops to and from Europe to have discussions with the Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. He will also have a brief meeting in Islamabad with President Bhutto of Pakistan, on his return flight from Europe.

Recalling that his previously planned visit to Europe in the past northern summer (June/July) had had to be deferred because of the elections in May, Mr. Whitlam stated that he regarded the visit as of sufficient importance to be undertaken at the earliest convenient opportunity. His absence from Australia would coincide with a period when Parliament was in recess.

The visit would represent a major step forward in establishing or expanding relationships at the highest level of Government between Australia and the countries of Europe. Consultations at the Head of Government level are essential to the establishment of a basic understanding and framework within which mutual interests can be identified and pursued. It is important that the nations of Europe fully appreciate the development of Australia's foreign policy since 1972, particularly countries with which Australia has such major trading relationships and important migration and cultural ties. The visit will help make up for neglect by previous Governments and provide opportunities for improved relationships in the future.

Mr. Whitlam said no previous Australian Prime Minister had paid an official visit to Italy, Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union. The last Australian Prime Minister to pay an official visit to Europe had been Sir Robert Menzies, more than a decade ago.

The intervening years had seen developments in Europe of enormous significance, not only for the Continent itself, but also for relationships between the major powers and for countries like Australia which had traditional economic, commercial and cultural ties with many European countries. It was not widely appreciated, perhaps, that the European Community was Australia's second largest market for exports after Japan and the largest source of Australia's imports. Important financial and commercial interests had been built up between Australia and Europe. Mr Whitlam noted that his visit to the European Commission will be the first by an Australian Prime Minister since the Community's formation.

Western Europe had moved towards a degree of political and economic integration that made it an entity of major importance with which Australia needed to develop and deepen a whole range of contacts. The countries of the Western world, of which Australia was one, were working to solve unprecedented economic and financial problems. The Soviet Union, one of the two Super Powers, was a part of Europe and its policies were of crucial importance to the development of the continent in peace and security. Mr Whitlam said he believed a visit by an Australian Head of Government would give particular stress to our recognition of the importance Europe had for Australia in an increasingly interdependent world. Amongst the matters he would discuss in Europe would be the food and energy situations which had the widest implications for the achievement of a world order based on equity and stability.

A particular aspect of his itinerary which would give him great pleasure, and to which he wished to draw attention, concerned his visits to countries, other than Britain, from which large numbers of migrants had settled in Australia in the post-war years. These countries included Italy, Greece, Malta and Yugoslavia. He would make a point in conveying to leaders of government in these countries Australia's gratitude for the contribution which their migrants had made to the economic and cultural development of Australia.

His visit to Greece would be the first by a Head of Government since the restoration of democracy in that country.

The visits to Moscow and Paris will mean that the Australian Prime Minister, having previously exchanged views with the leaders of the United States, Britain and China, will have met the leaders of the five nuclear powers and permanent members of the Security Council. In seeking such contacts in Europe, Mr Whitlam said, he would have as a further objective to build with the leaders of modern Europe the same close relationships as he had developed with national leaders in Asia and North America.

In summary, Mr. Whitlam said the visits were important because of Europe's position as Australia's largest trading partner; its significance as a source of international finance and its crucial position in the world monetary system; its advanced technological situation, particularly in energy matters; and its significance as a source of migrants and of culture for Australia.

In view of the importance of the visits, Mr. Lionel Bowen, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister and Special Minister of State, will travel with Mr. Whitlam. Mr. Whitlam will use a Qantas charter aircraft and will be accompanied by his wife, members of his personal staff and representatives of government departments with a prime interest in the visit, including the Secretaries of the Departments of Minerals and Energy and of Overseas Trade, and Deputy Secretaries of the Department of Foreign Affairs and of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and a senior Treasury official.

CANBERRA, A.C.T.