

17

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT - INDO-CHINA. THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM,
Q.C., M.P., PRIME MINISTER. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
8 APRIL 1975

Thirty years ago France attempted to re-establish her fallen empire in Indo-China. A war for independence became a war of massive foreign intervention. It engulfed a region. It challenged the might and will of the greatest power on earth. It made a wilderness of some of the fairest portions of the globe. The most tranquil city in Asia - Phnom Penh - has been made, in the words of the Member for Kooyong, a mire of human misery. Centres of old civilisations have been made cities of death. The war unleashed on a peasant people the heaviest bombing in history and the greatest fire power used in history. Not less than two million have been killed. Countless more have been maimed. Yet the war continues.

It is ten years this month since Sir Robert Menzies announced the commitment of the First Australian Battalion to Vietnam. Since then it has been the duty of successive Prime Ministers to report to Parliament and people on Australian activities, on Australian actions, including activity by the armed services, in Indo-China. I am now the fifth Australian Prime Minister to have to fulfil that duty - but with this difference: for the first time an Australian Prime Minister need report only on our humanitarian involvement, including the use of the armed services, and our endeavours to end the war rather than escalate the war.

After all these years, after all the blunders and bloodshed of thirty years, what tolerable or feasible objective can any foreign government set for itself except the ending of the war, except the ending of the killing as soon as possible. We outsiders never had the right to intervene. But even if there were such a right or even if it was right to intervene, would anyone now suggest that any foreign government should resume that intervention? If we have learnt nothing else in the last thirty years we have surely learnt this much, at a heavy cost to ourselves but at a terrible one to the people we claimed to be helping.

For a generation and more, Australia shared with her Pacific partners a great delusion about our rights, our interests, our obligations. Those who acted for Australia as a government mistook entirely the nature of Australia's interests and obligations and her rights. They shared, and encouraged the Australian people to accept, a delusion about the nature of the conflict in Indo-China. All of us are still paying the price for those mistakes - in economic cost, in loss of confidence in Western civilisation itself. We can repair the losses, other than the lives destroyed. But to do so it is necessary not to repeat the mistakes of the past - not just the mistakes in action but the mistakes of attitude. It was a mistaken attitude after the revolution in China that led step by step to the mistaken view of Australian interests and American interests and mistaken actions in Indo-China. Surely we have learnt our lesson at last.

For twenty years there has been a kind of tragic inevitability about the events now taking place. The great chance, the great opportunity for a political settlement, for peace throughout Indo-China was given in 1954 by the Geneva Agreements. The chance was lost, the opportunity was thrown away. The Geneva Agreements provided the two basic ingredients for a political settlement - re-unification after free elections. If such elections had been held, they would almost certainly have resulted in the power over a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh. Rather than face this prospect the regime in Saigon, urged on by the then United States Administration, refused to hold elections. The result has been that an outcome which might have been achieved by political means twenty years ago, an outcome certainly foreseen by the parties to the Geneva Agreements, whether they welcomed it or not, now seems likely to be achieved only after these twenty more years of bloodshed.

The next great effort to achieve a political solution resulted in the Paris Agreements of January, 1973. Once again those Agreements envisaged a government of one Vietnam with participation of all parties, not just the governments of Saigon and Hanoi but the Provisional Revolutionary Government - the Vietcong so called. Neither the Geneva Agreements nor the Paris Agreements ever allowed the idea that North and South Vietnam were two separate countries. As Article 15 of the Paris Agreements states: "The military demarcation line between the two zones at the seventeenth parallel is only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary, as provided for in Paragraph 6 of the final declaration of the 1954 Geneva Conference." In other words, from 1954 to the present day, from the fall of Dien Bien Phu 21 years ago to the fall of Hue two weeks ago, the war in Vietnam has retained its essential character. It is a civil war. The real character of the war has never changed. What has changed is the nature of the fighting and the level of violence. That change, with all the additional suffering and killing it has caused, is overwhelmingly due to one factor - foreign intervention. The real result of foreign intervention, principally the United States on the side of Saigon and Russia on the side of Hanoi, has been to raise the level of violence, to raise the capacity for mutual destruction on both sides. That is, if the two sides insisted on a solution by military means, then foreign intervention made it certain that the end - whatever the outcome - would be as bloody as possible. What outsiders, including Australia, have done is to create two of the world's largest armies. That is our real legacy to Vietnam. That is almost the sole military result of years of intervention. Let those who year after year encouraged a military solution, those who decried as weakness or even treason the calls for negotiations and the calls for political settlement, now, and at last, recognise the real consequences of their work. These strongmen, these realists, the men on horse-back, insisted upon a military solution. So a military solution it is now to be.

It should also be emphasised that both the Geneva Agreements and the Paris Agreements envisaged that all contending parties would share political responsibility in a re-united Vietnam. The Geneva Agreements envisaged free elections. The Paris Agreements provided for a National Reconciliation Council, to arrange for general elections in South Vietnam. Article 12 stated:

"Immediately after the cease-fire, the South Vietnamese parties shall hold consultations in a spirit of national reconciliation and concord, mutual respect, and mutual non-elimination to set up a national council of national reconciliation and concord of three equal segments. After the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord has assumed its functions, the two South Vietnamese parties will consult about the formation of councils at lower levels. The two South Vietnamese parties shall sign an Agreement on the internal matters of South Vietnam as soon as possible and do their utmost to accomplish this within ninety days after the cease-fire comes into effect."

This was the crucial political article of the Paris Agreements. The Saigon Government has refused to act to implement this central provision. It has not been prepared to join with the Provisional Revolutionary Government. This breach is the key to the justification for military retaliation claimed by the opponents of the Saigon Government.

Because the political opportunities have been for a second time lost, a military solution became inevitable in the broader sense. This does not mean, however, that the actual and specific events of the past three weeks were themselves inevitable. The over-running of so much of South Vietnam is by no means a classic example of a blitzkrieg. In very large measure the North Vietnamese forces have been moving into a military vacuum. The United States' Defence Secretary, Mr Schlesinger, said on 31 March that it was Saigon's withdrawal rather than a communist general offensive which was the primary cause of the Government of Vietnam's present difficulties. President Ford said on 3 April: "A unilateral decision to withdraw created the chaotic situation that exists now. It was a unilateral decision by President Thieu."

To state these facts is not to condone breaches of the Paris Agreements by North Vietnam. There have been gross breaches repeatedly by both sides. It is just a plain statement of fact that the immediate chaotic situation north of Saigon is due to the unilateral decision by President Thieu. In the words of the Australian Journalist Denis Warner - close as he is to military councils in Saigon - "The shattering loss of central Vietnam, which has swung the balance of forces entirely in Hanoi's favour, was not caused by enemy action but by hideous blunders in Saigon." The decision to withdraw and, perhaps even more importantly, the way it was made, with no explanation, no consultation, no communication, had two immediate results. It destroyed the morale of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and it spread panic to the population.

It is in this situation of unparalleled chaos and unexpected rapidity of events - unexpected in Hanoi itself - that the Australian Government has tried to apply its resources to save lives, to relieve suffering.

It must be emphasised that the suddenness of the collapse in South Vietnam limited the scope and effectiveness of any aid given by the Australian Government or by any other government.

Members of the Opposition have chosen to belittle our efforts. For example, the Leader of the Opposition particularised our participation in the attempted evacuation of Danang as a "futile and pathetic gesture - too little, too late." The truth is that the Australian Government met, as soon as it was received through the American Embassy, a request from the Government of South Vietnam for assistance. The decision was taken to make available seven Hercules transport aircraft together with other aircraft currently based at Butterworth in Malaysia. On 2 April I received the following message:

"Please accept my warm appreciation and deep admiration for your help to evacuate the many desperate refugees from Danang. Australia can take great pride in the rapid decision to meet an absolutely essential humanitarian requirement. Warmest respect. (Signed) Admiral Noel Gayler, United States Commander in Chief Pacific."

The Australian Government last year contributed \$1.15 million to international organisations to be spent in Indo-China - on both sides - during the current financial year. On 28 March the Australian Government announced a further contribution of \$200,000 to the Indo-China Operations Group of the International Red Cross, which operates throughout Indo-China. On 2 April I announced a further contribution of \$1 million to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees' relief work among refugees in all parts of Indo-China, on both sides of the lines of military control. On 3 April I opened a public appeal for a \$5 million refugee aid fund, to be co-ordinated by the Disaster Emergency Committee of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid.

Yesterday the Minister for Foreign Affairs announced a further grant of \$1 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This brings the total Australian Government aid to international humanitarian organisations operating in Indo-China to \$3.4 million.

The action which has attracted most attention is of course the bringing of children to Australia. In this matter, the sole role of the Australian Government was to bring eligible children to suitable adoptive families as promptly and as safely as possible. Nobody has been helped by unfounded claims that vast numbers of orphans were waiting for evacuation from Saigon.

At all times, the Australian Government has been bound to require two conditions: that orphans would be approved for exit from Saigon by the South Vietnamese Government for adoption in Australia, and that the States would guarantee that normal adoption procedures would be observed.

As soon as the Australian Government received advice that the first requirement had been met, and that on the second, the States had approved 246 adopting families, arrangements were made to bring the orphans by Hercules transport to Bangkok and by chartered Qantas jet to Sydney. Australian Government authorities found that many of the children evacuated from Saigon were the subject of uncompleted off shore adoption procedures in South Vietnam by Australian nationals. Faced with this fact, my Government determined that it could do nothing in the matter of allocating children to families as this was clearly a State responsibility and therefore if there was to be any disagreement between adoptive families about the children then it was a matter for the States to determine.

The Government had arranged for an aircraft to depart Sydney yesterday afternoon for Bangkok to evacuate a second group of orphans. That aircraft did not take off, following advice from our Ambassador in Saigon that the South Vietnamese authorities decided not to release any more children as they wished to reconsider their policy on adoption by foreign nationals. Our Ambassador has been unable to confirm reports that this decision has since been reversed.

I should point out, however, that the decision itself amply demonstrates that there is no large pool of orphans awaiting urgent evacuation and, further, that the Saigon Government has properly insisted on the performance of its own policies and procedures.

The actions of the Government in the immediate emergency are part of the longstanding program and policy we have adopted since achieving office. Our immediate objective has been to do what we can to stop the fighting, to bring the war to an end. Our long-term objective has been to help rebuild a devastated Vietnam and help rehabilitate its people. We have consistently pursued both objectives since December 1972. The most important step open to Australia to reduce the level of violence was always to stop contributing militarily to that violence. Within a week of taking office we ordered the end of Australia's military involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia.

The second contribution open to Australia was to use diplomatic influence to end the fighting. In particular the Australian Government has tried to promote adherence to the Paris Agreements. We have lost no opportunity to encourage the Vietnamese parties to implement the Agreements to the full, and to deplore the breaches of the Agreements by both sides. And, of course, we have been able to do this only because we are diplomatically represented in both Saigon and Hanoi.

These attitudes have consistently been expressed over the past 15 months by me and by the Foreign Minister at the highest level, and by personal contact between Vietnamese ministers and officials and some of my colleagues, including the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence.

As recently as 13 March I wrote to both President Thieu and the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister stressing Australia's support for the implementation of the Agreements, our concern at the continued lack of progress, the continued fighting and the continuing breaches of the Agreements by both sides.

The fact is that the Australian Government has been foremost among nations in seeking to end the war and relieve the suffering it has caused. In this immediate emergency, no government has been more active, more concerned and, reflecting the wishes of the Australian people, more generous. And it is worth noting the real reason why the Australian people expect their Government so to act. Why does Vietnam invoke a very special kind of emotion and concern and compassion in Australia? It's not just the scale and extent of the suffering, which is not, unhappily, unique, not even unusual in this troubled world. The refugee, the homeless, the starving, the innocent victims of war number millions upon millions across three continents. But Vietnam has a power over the Australian conscience for one particular reason. The Australian people have accepted the truth, the bitter truth, that the intervention into which they were led was disastrously wrong, that it only increased and lengthened the agony of Vietnam. The Australian people have acknowledged the truth in the same way that the American people and the American Congress have acknowledged it. But is the truth of the disaster acknowledged by its authors and their abettors?

One of the most depressing aspects of this whole tragic episode has been the lamentable performance of the Opposition in the past two weeks. I've listened with increasing dismay and contempt to the statements by spokesmen for the Opposition. I pass over the humbug and hypocrisy - par for the course - but the truly depressing thing has been the mounting evidence that with the Opposition nothing has changed. Ten years of destruction have changed nothing. The present Leader of the Opposition has even revived the domino theory, smartly dismissed by the Prime Minister of Singapore as "old hash". The one great constant in the attitude of the parties opposite to the war in Vietnam, throughout the period of Australia's involvement, was their determination to squeeze every drop of political advantage out of it. And even in the final throes, they're at it again. One could hear all the echoes from the past, right from that unforgettable night ten years ago, 28 April 1965, when from this side of the House they bayed and brayed with a delight they didn't bother to conceal as Sir Robert Menzies announced the first instalment of Australia's military commitment. It was their finest hour. They laughed as they lied their way into this war. But throughout the subsequent years, in any debate which had to deal with any American initiatives to disengage or de-escalate the war, they were notable for their sullen silence. The only occasion their spirits revived was when, five years ago President Nixon unleashed the South Vietnamese Army upon Cambodia, escalating the war to its most ferocious level and transforming a haven of fragile peace into a war-ravaged wilderness.

In the orchestrated outpourings of the past week there has been just one new note - muted as yet, but clearly designed to become a grand new theme, and that is that the United States is an untrustworthy ally. The irony of it! We are witnessing the beginning of a new effort to sow the seeds of fear and suspicion and division in Australia. What else is the purpose of this attempt to blame the United States Congress and the American people for the debacle in which the Government of South Vietnam now finds itself. There could be only one other motive - to shame the United States back into Indo-China. Is this the wish of the Opposition? Is this their proposal for either the United States or Australia - to get back into the war? - to prolong it for yet another decade? If that is not their proposal, then what criticism of substance can they have against my Government's attitudes or actions with regard to Indo-China, now or at any time in the past two years and four months?

In the heady days when Vietnam was a popular war, when it was a political goldmine, before the people of Australia came to see its implications and consequences for Indo-China, for Australia, for the United States, the constant challenge made in this House, not least from the present Leader of the Opposition, was, "stand up and be counted". Indeed, the first time this challenge was raised in this House was against me - by the then Minister for External Affairs, now Lord Casey - 21 years ago. It was in 1954 that in this House I first warned against Australian or American military involvement in Indo-China. Let the Members of the Opposition now stand up and be counted and say that they believe it was wrong

that we should have got completely out of the war or believe that the United States or Australia should go back into the war.

As to the United States, she has fulfilled any obligations she assumed to the Government of Saigon. Neither the honour nor the interests of a great people can be confided to any particular foreign regime. But the United States' honour and interests do lie in helping rebuild a unified Vietnam, the unification of which misguided policies, mistaken policies of the past so long delayed; the United States' honour and interest lie in helping to rebuild an Indo-China to the devastation of which those policies so greatly contributed. That is the way for the United States to regain her real place of leadership in our region. To helping in such a task, the Australian Government is already committed, indeed, already contributing. And in that task Australia, as far as this Government is concerned, will be a good partner with the United States.

We will have no truck with those who put out the line that the United States should resume her intervention in the war. We will have no truck with any suggestion that America's honour or reputation requires resumed intervention. We will have no truck with those who seek to build a new philosophy of fear upon the unwarranted assertion of American dishonour in refusing to intervene with force on behalf of the Saigon Government.

While the security of Australia has never rested solely upon the American alliance, that alliance remains a key element in it. And whatever the outcome of the events now unfolding in Vietnam, the basic elements of Australia's security remain untouched.

Who rules in Saigon is not, and never has been, an ingredient in Australia's security. Our strength, our security rest on factors and relationships ultimately unchanged by these events. The really important factors and relations are those which have been developed by the Australian Government since December 1972 - our relations with our closest and largest neighbour Indonesia, our relations with our greatest trading partner Japan, our relations with China, our active support for development of co-operation between ASEAN members, our efforts to ensure that the Indian Ocean does not become the next area of confrontation between the super-powers as Indo-China became, in a sense, the first. Above all, Australia's security, as with the peace of the world, rests ultimately upon making the detente between the United States and the Soviet Union a success and with associating China in a wider detente. These are the great relationships and the great factors which determine the security of Australia. This Government has been unremitting in its efforts to strengthen those relationships. Those efforts have been rewarded with remarkable success.

It is not possible that the nightmare of Vietnam will ever pass from the memory or the conscience of any man or woman of our time. Nor should it. But the work we are now doing to build good, constructive relations with peoples and nations throughout the world will outlive even that bitter memory, will outlast even the bad and destructive things inflicted on the people of Vietnam during the past thirty years.