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PRIME MINISTER

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VISITS OF NUCLEAR POWERED WARSHIPS

I wish to inform the House that my Government has decided to allow the resumption of visits to Australian ports by nuclear powered warships. This decision has been made after a long and careful examination of the many aspects associated with this subject.

In furtherance of the objective of ensuring that matters affecting the environment are fully examined and taken into account, the Government has given very careful consideration to a classified draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the Department of Defence. However, in the opinion of the Government it would be contrary to the interests of Australia for this document to be made available publicly.

Nevertheless, in order that maximum possible information consistent with the interests of Australia, be made available to the public, a document entitled "Environmental Considerations of Visits of Nuclear Powered Warships to Australia" dated May 1976 is attached to this statement.

The House will be aware that there have been a number of visits in the past by United States nuclear powered warships. In the interests of our national security, the Australian Government attaches great importance to the presence in this area, under the ANZUS alliance, of the United States Navy, which is increasingly converting to nuclear powered warships.

With well over one hundred naval reactors in operation, United States nuclear powered warships have visited over thirty countries and eighty five foreign ports.

Our decision follows consultations with the United States Government on safety procedures and legal indemnity. In the latter connection, the United States Congress in December 1974 enacted a Law (Public Law 93-513) pursuant to which, as was made clear by the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy, the United States accepts absolute liability for any nuclear damage which might result from a nuclear incident involving the reactor of a United States warship.

The Government is taking these decisions on the basis of international experience with nuclear powered warships and in light of the assessments in the unclassified Environmental document which I am tabling. The Government accepts the expert advice that the risk of an incident resulting in a release of radio-activity is extremely low and the hazard to human health and the environment is remote. All necessary control and safety measures will be implemented at the berths to be used.

Those matters are dealt with in detail in the document "Environmental Considerations of Visits of Nuclear Powered Warships to Australia". I would also point to the remarkable safety record of United States nuclear powered warships.

There is further compelling reason why action is required in this matter. About a third of the United States Navy is nuclear powered. We have a military alliance with the United States through the ANZUS Treaty. Under Article II of that Treaty, we have undertaken to act separately and jointly to maintain and develop our individual and collective capacity.... Unless nuclear powered ships are able to use Australian ports, there will be no prospects of Australia remaining an adequate and reliable ANZUS partner. That is not a statement from any American source - it is my own.

The ANZUS Treaty requires cooperation with the United States. At the very least, that would require that the United States be able to replenish her ships and that we should provide such support as we are able, not only in peace-time circumstances as a good ally, but in any emergency that may arise in the future. The vital character of our alliance with the United States and with ANZUS require this action to be taken.

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In reaching a decision on the resumption of visits, the Government has had the benefit of a very wide range of expert advice. Defence and Australian Atomic Energy Commission scientists have participated in the examinations and relevant matters have received consideration by the Australian Ionising Radiation Advisory Council.

Appropriate arrangements concerning environmental safeguards will be applied in consultation with state governments by a group of officials led by officials of the Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development. Such arrangements will be undertaken, as necessary, before visits take place.

I present the following paper:

Visits of Nuclear Powered Warships
Ministerial Statement - June 1976.

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