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PRIME MINISTER

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STATEMENT ON MIDDLE EAST SITUATION

I seek leave to make a statement to the House about the agreements reached at Camp David between Prime Minister Begin of Israel and President Sadat of Egypt.

As Honourable Members will know, the thirteen day long Camp David talks which concluded on September 17 resulted from the personal initiative of President Carter.

The Government very much welcomed this initiative and it welcomes the promising results that have been achieved.

I can mention to the House that President Carter was in touch with me immediately before the talks at Camp David, and that he again wrote to me following the conclusion of the talks.

In my reply to the President's latest letter, I conveyed to him my warmest congratulations on his personal achievement in bringing the two parties to agreement on a Framework for Peace in the Middle East and the Australian Government's commitment to support his untiring efforts to bridge the distance between Israeli and Egyptian standpoints.

I am sure all members of this House would wish to join with me in congratulating the President on his initiative, and I note that the Honourable Member for Holt on Tuesday gave notice of a motion to this effect in which he was supported by members on both sides of the House.

I also pay tribute to the statesmanship of President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin.

All Honourable Members will be fully aware of the importance of the Middle East Region for world peace, and its vital significance to Western interests.

In the last thirty years, the Region has been in continual turmoil. There have been four wars between the Arabs and the Israelis. This has brought appalling suffering to the peoples of the Region.

The instability created by this situation has been a constant threat to world peace, and a constant invitation to unwarranted external interference.

The search for peace has been a continuing preoccupation of the United Nations and Western States throughout this period.

Under successive American Presidents, the United States has made strenuous efforts to promote a settlement. These efforts, however, foundered largely on the inability of the parties concerned to overcome their deep-seated mutual fear and distrust.

It was not until the bold and imaginative initiative of President Sadat in going to Jerusalem in November 1977 that the hope of a breakthrough towards some sort of settlement in the Middle East seemed capable of realisation.

Unfortunately, the negotiations which followed President Sadat's visit to Israel, and Mr Begin's return visit to Egypt, did not gather the necessary momentum to enable a proper framework for a settlement to be established.

It became apparent after the Leeds Castle meetings in July that if there was to be any prospect of further progress, some new stimulus would be needed.

President Carter took the courageous step of inviting the Egyptian and Israeli leaders to meet him at Camp David for personal discussions. President Carter wrote to me on 15 August about his reasons for initiating the Camp David talks, and what he hoped to accomplish from them.

In my reply to him I emphasised the Australian Government's support for the talks and the importance we attached to them.

The outcome of the talks is known to Honourable Members. In summary, two agreements were signed by President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin, and witnessed by President Carter.

The first agreement is entitled "A Framework for Peace in The Middle East" and covers the West Bank and Gaza. It envisages a five-year transitional period during which Israeli military forces will be withdrawn to garrisons in specified locations, and the election of a self-governing authority with full autonomy.

Negotiations will be held among Egypt, Israel and - if it agrees to participate - Jordan, as well as elected representatives of the Palestinians to determine the final status of the West Bank and Gaza and - it is hoped - to produce a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan.

During the negotiations there will be a freeze on the establishment of new Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Security arrangements may include United Nations forces, special security zones, demilitarized zones and early warning stations.

There is to be an exchange of letters on the Status of East Jerusalem.

The second agreement, entitled "A Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel", covers the Sinai and future bilateral relations.

It envisages a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel to be signed within three months: full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai phased over no more than three years from the signing of the treaty; the handing over of Israeli airfields in the Sinai to Egyptian civilian control beginning from three to nine months after that signing; the establishment of security zones; and the establishment of normal relations between Egypt and Israel on completion of the first major Israeli withdrawal.

The Australian Government believes that the two agreements provide a constructive framework for the resolution of the Middle East conflict.

President Carter's timely initiative was clearly a vital factor in bringing the two parties to these agreements, which will surely be regarded as an historic turning point in the search for a settlement in the Middle East.

We particularly welcome the agreement by the leaders of Egypt and Israel that the provisions and principles of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 will govern the negotiations for an agreed basis for a peaceful settlement between Israel and its neighbours. This is a position which the Australian Government has consistently taken.

We also welcome the recognition in the Camp David agreements of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to participate in the determination of their own future. This also accords with the stated policy of the Australian Government.

A difficult road lies ahead. Other Arab States, whose support will be essential to any lasting settlement, have yet to be convinced that the Camp David framework can be an acceptable basis for future negotiations.

We hope that the Middle Eastern governments, in the spirit of Camp David, will be encouraged to support this framework and to participate in future negotiations in the search for peace.

It is most important that the momentum generated by the Camp David agreements be maintained. Continued diplomatic activity will be critical to the objectives of ensuring further progress in the negotiations in the months ahead.

In this context, the present round of talks being undertaken by Mr Vance with key Arab leaders will be of fundamental importance.

The Australian Government stands ready to give its support to the terms of any settlement agreed upon between the parties in the Middle East.

I have written to President Carter today to inform him that the Australian Government regards the agreements reached at Camp David as a major contribution towards a peace settlement, and that he has our full support for his efforts to bring an end to the threat of war in the Middle East.

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