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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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ZIMBABWE INDEPENDENCE CELEBRATIONS

The Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Malcolm Fraser, C.H., M.P., will be attending the Zimbabwe independence celebrations in Salisbury on 17-18 April. The Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Mr. Robert Mugabe, has extended a personal invitation to a small number of heads of government including Mr. Fraser.

Other heads of government who have indicated they will attend so far include President Kaunda of Zambia, President Shagari of Nigeria, and Prime Minister Gandhi of India. A large number of countries will be represented at the independence celebrations.

The achievement of an independent Zimbabwe is an event of major significance in the history of Southern Africa. After fifteen years of illegality and eight years of a bitter civil war, Rhodesia was returned to legality as a British colony last December, and free and fair elections were held under British supervision.

These elections resulted in a clear victory for Mr. Mugabe's party, the Zimbabwe African National Union (Patriotic Front). Mr. Mugabe was appointed Prime Minister on 4 March but the British Governor, Lord Soames, has continued to exercise his functions in the pre-independence period. At midnight on 17 April, the British flag will be lowered and the flag of independent Zimbabwe will be raised. Zimbabwe is expected to join the Commonwealth on independence.

Australia has contributed to the process leading to Zimbabwe's independence in a number of important ways. At the Lusaka Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last August, Australia was a member of the six-nation contact group which drafted the principles for a Rhodesian settlement which formed the basis of the subsequent Lancaster House negotiations.

Australia provided a 154-man contingent to the Commonwealth Ceasefire Monitoring Force. Australia also sent an eight-man national group to observe the election, and an Australian Observer, Mr. K.C.O. Shann, C.B.E., served on the Commonwealth Election Observer Group.

I am looking forward to a close and fruitful relationship between Australia and the new nation of Zimbabwe. As previously announced, the Australian liaison office in Salisbury is to become a resident High Commission.