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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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AUSTRALIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE SINAI PEACEKEEPING FORCE

In my statement to the Parliament on 22 October, I announced the terms of the Government's decision concerning Australian participation in the Sinai Peacekeeping Force.

I stated that:

"the Government has decided that Australia will agree to participate in the Sinai Peacekeeping Force subject to Britain and Canada also agreeing to participate. In the interests of obtaining the broadest-based international acceptance of the Force, significant European participation is a critical factor. We are glad to see from published reports that France is reconsidering her attitude.

I also said that:

"there is a limit to what Australia as a middle power can do. We must avoid unrealistic views of what we can achieve. But to say that there are limits is in no way to say that we could not make a valuable contribution in conjunction with other countries which share our interests and our concern for peace in the region".

In our consideration of a possible Australian contribution, a principal concern from the outset has been the need to achieve a balanced, truly multi-national force. The Government has made this plain from the beginning.

The Government considered this matter in early October, at the time of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. As a result of discussions that then took place, it seemed that the most likely way to achieve a balanced force would be for Canada and Britain to participate in the Force, along with Australia, to join with the other countries which had already indicated their willingness to participate. That is why the decision about Australian participation was made in those terms, and why the United States was informed of our decision in those terms.

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On 28 October, in answer to a question in Parliament about reports foreshadowing agreement by France, Britain, The Netherlands and Italy to take part in the Peacekeeping Force. I said

"Obviously that also will lead to a balanced force.

The Commonwealth's concern all along is that there be a balanced force. We would obviously look at the matter on the merits to see which countries are actually going to perform and to contribute. But I am making the point that the participation of Canada is not the only way of achieving that particular objective."

It has now been announced that France, Britain, The Netherlands and Italy intend to participate in the Peacekeeping Force.

The announcement to participate by these four countries meets the Commonwealth Government's requirement for a balanced multi-national force, and makes it possible for Australia also to participate. We have noted that the Egyptian Government has welcomed the European decision, and we look forward to the Israeli Government's doing likewise. With difficulties unlikely to arise in respect of the other matters mentioned in my statement of 22 October, the Government will be advising the United States, Egypt and Israel of Australia's agreement to participate in the Force.

We welcome the recent statement by the Prime Minister of New Zealand concerning New Zealand's intentions.

The Government's decision of 12 October about Australian participation included a number of other aspects which are important to the full protection of Australia's independence and sovereignty. Discussions are taking place in relation to these other matters and I am confident that no obstacles will arise. In respect of our concern that the Sinai peacekeeping force not be linked with the Rapid Deployment Force, the United States Secretary of State has said that any contribution of a US contingent would be for the specific peacekeeping mission provided for in the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. As I said in my statement to the Parliament on 22 October, the precise composition of our contribution will be decided after discussions with other participants, and also the duration of our participation has to be agreed. In due course, after discussions with all relevant parties, an announcement will be made giving the precise details of our commitment. The commitment will, however, be consistent with that stated to the Parliament.

The Government has made it plain that a solution to the Palestinian issue is clearly central to the future stability and peace of the Middle East. As I said in my statement of 22 October, the Government is concerned that our participation in the peace-keeping force would have the maximum possible influence in continuing and broadening the peace process in the Middle East.