



PRIME MINISTER

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ELECTORATE TALK

HMAS Tobruk, the Royal Australian Navy's supply ship, left last week for the Middle East with the eight Australian helicopters, and other equipment for Australia's contingent in the Sinai Peacekeeping Force. The troops of our main contingent, numbering in all about 120 men, will fly out later, in time to establish themselves at their posts by 20 March. But their big starting day will be 25 April.

That is the date laid down in the Treaty of Peace between Israel and Egypt when the Israelis will withdraw their military and civil personnel from the remaining parts of Egypt's Sinai territory which they occupied during the 1967 Middle East War. That date will mark the end of a whole era in the tragedy of the Middle East conflict.

Australia's participation in the Peacekeeping Force means the association of our country with a new chapter. This new chapter is one which could not have come into prospect without the courage and determination of the leaders of Egypt and Israel to achieve the peace which now exists between them. The Peacekeeping Force is there because these two countries, which were at war, want it to be there to guarantee peace. The Peacekeeping Force will underpin the achievement of peace within one major area of a region which has been the most unstable in the world since the Second World War. The hatred, suspicion and bitterness which have arisen from the special circumstances of that region led to four wars in the space of one generation. These wars have threatened world peace. We know that any future war in that part of the world will seriously jeopardise the fragile stability overseas which is so precious to Australians. The vital interests of too many important countries are caught up in Middle East affairs for another outbreak of war there to leave Australia unscathed. No one can be certain about peace anywhere. Peace requires strenuous efforts if it is to be maintained. It requires constant vigilance, constant awareness, but above all a preparedness to make sacrifices. We are prepared to make such sacrifices.

Peace will fail by default if all nations wanting peace leave the actual pursuit of it to others. It has never been part of the Australian tradition to let this happen. In the Middle East already Australia has contributed to a number of peacekeeping operations. We have contributed men to the United Nations truce supervisory organisation, and men and helicopters to the United Nations Emergency Force in another part of the Sinai.

We have contributed police to the United Nations force in Cyprus and Australian defence force personnel to the United Nations military observer group in India and Pakistan.

The United Nations has a record in these peacekeeping operations of which it can be proud. We would have preferred that the Sinai Peacekeeping Force be a further part of that record. But faced with a Soviet veto of a United Nations mandate for the Peacekeeping Force - faced with a choice between a force which could be set up outside the United Nations umbrella and no force at all, we were not prepared to let the Soviet Union achieve its obstructionist objective in the search for a Middle East peace. There is no reason why the United Nations should not at some time in the future extend its mandate to include this peacekeeping activity. Nor is there any reason, of course, why the United Nations must always be associated with successful international efforts to mediate in situations of conflict and maintain the peace.

One of the most successful episodes in recent years in resolving conflict and hostility between nations was the Commonwealth contribution to the implementation of the Lancaster House Agreement by which Zimbabwe attained its independence. Australia was a key participant in the negotiations leading to the Agreement. We were one of the principal contributors to the military force ensuring that the ceasefire led to a stable political settlement. We are also going to play a role, under Commonwealth auspices, in the training of the Ugandan army to help the government of Uganda overcome the disintegration of that country after the years of Idi Amin's destructive rule.

When the Government took its decision last October to participate in the Sinai Peacekeeping Force, we did so on the condition that there would be significant European participation. We were not then certain that there would be wide-ranging international participation, but we felt that a country like Australia had a unique contribution to make in starting the ball rolling. Our decision has indeed been vindicated. Last October, among the major countries, only the United States had committed itself to participate in the Force. Since Australia took its decision Britain, France, The Netherlands and Italy, as well as New Zealand, have joined the Force. These later decisions have been most gratifying to the Government and in retrospect we can see our decision as being a catalyst to the events which have subsequently taken place.

There again, when we took our decision in principle last year, fears were to be heard about the reactions of the Arab states which, objecting for their own reasons to the Egypt/Israel peace treaty, were thought to be poised to retaliate against Australian interests if we decided to join the Peacekeeping Force. In the event there has been no adverse reaction, no threats to embassies, no measures taken against our trade, no interdiction of movement by Australians in Arab countries.

What seems to have happened is that these other countries have had a higher regard for the achievements that Egypt has been able to make - both in regaining its territory and in establishing the basis for peace with Israel - than had the critics of the time. Moreover, even though these countries do not themselves support the Camp David Accords, they understand very clearly Australia is seeking to advance the cause of peace in the Middle East.

No one can doubt that the return of the Sinai to Egypt is but one part of the complex of problems which any comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East must solve. A solution to the Palestinian issue is clearly central to the future stability and peace of the Middle East. Our troops will not be involved with the issues making up the dispute between Israel and the Arab countries over the Palestinians' rights.

But in our participation we are concerned that our contribution should have the maximum positive influence in continuing and broadening the peace process in the Middle East. The withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai, if it can be achieved successfully, will be a large contribution to confidence among the disputants. Such confidence is a vital ingredient of the new chapter which will open in the Middle East after 25 April. Australia will be looking to all the parties to the dispute as well as the United States to ensure effective progress in these other vital areas.
