



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
AUSTRALIA'S CONTINGENT TO NAMIBIA
HOLSWORTHY - 5 APRIL 1989**

Next week you will be in Namibia - a country taking, with your help, its first steps towards independence. As members of 17 Construction Squadron, you will be joining the advance contingent of 94 Australians already in Namibia.

Southern Africa has been a focus of instability and conflict for many years. It has been and remains a region that bears the burdens of civil war, poverty, and the obscenity of apartheid. One of the oldest disputes in this region - indeed one that finds its very origins in the settlement of the First World War - has been the question of independence for Namibia. It is this matter that now stands on the threshold of resolution under the guidance of the United Nations.

As members of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) you will be making an important contribution to transforming Namibia from a war zone to a peace zone, from a colony to a sovereign state.

UNTAG's mission is to monitor the ceasefire and troop withdrawals, to preserve law and order in Namibia and to supervise elections for the new Government of Namibia.

This will not be an easy process. Since the Transition Period in Namibia began on 1 April, there have already been serious clashes between members of SWAPO on one hand and elements of the Namibian police and the South African Defence Forces on the other.

The clashes have been serious and bloody. More than two hundred people have been killed. The situation is still tense and serious.

The Australian Government is concerned at the breakdown of the ceasefire at this delicate and early stage of the Transition Period.

It is particularly regrettable that these clashes have occurred at a time when the UN does not have its three infantry battalions deployed, and does not have sufficient personnel in place to monitor all aspects of the transition arrangements.

But all of this only highlights the importance and sensitivity of your task. As members of the military component of UNTAG, you will have to work hard to keep the UN plan on track. We are under no illusions about the risks and dangers of your task.

From your base in Grootfontein in Northern Namibia, you will provide important engineering and construction support to the UN effort. Such support will be sorely needed. Namibia is a large, arid, sparsely-populated and underdeveloped country, wracked for years by the destruction of war. You will have to build roads, bridges, airstrips and camps for UNTAG. You will also have the dangerous task of clearing mines which have been laid by the various contending forces along the border between Angola and Namibia.

In performing these tasks, you will be continuing the proud tradition established by the Australian Defence Forces in similar difficult circumstances in the past. Australians have served with honour and distinction in UN Peacekeeping Forces in Asia, Europe, the Indian sub-continent and in the Middle East. In Africa, we participated in the Commonwealth force that monitored Zimbabwe's transition to independence in 1980.

Your involvement in the UNTAG process will see you contributing to what may be one of the United Nations' most substantial achievements for many years. Certainly, you and the advance members of your party already in Namibia represent the largest contribution to a peacekeeping force that Australia has ever made.

I note with gratitude that the Opposition parties in Federal Parliament, represented here today by the Leader of the Opposition, have expressed their full support for the decision to despatch this force.

The Government has taken special measures to provide you with a comprehensive and generous set of conditions of service, including the payment of special allowances and tax exemptions, in recognition of your difficult task. It is some compensation at least to you and your families for the burden of separation that you will bear while deployed in Namibia.

The eyes of the world will be on you. The thoughts and the best wishes of all Australians will be with you.

As Prime Minister I express my deepest hopes for your success on your six month tour of duty and for your safe return. I do so in the knowledge that you will make an outstanding contribution to the future peace and prosperity of an independent Namibian people. I do so in the knowledge that you will do all Australians proud.
