



PRIME MINISTER

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E & O E - PROOF ONLY

PM: Just a statement, no questions?

JOURNALIST: What did Mr Bush have to say to you this morning when he called you, Mr Prime Minister?

PM: Well he explained the circumstances of the military intervention by the United States. Of course, let me say that the Government regrets any circumstances where intervention by a military force occurs. However, I want to make it clear as I did to President Bush when he rang me this morning, that we do understand the circumstances under which the United States did intervene. It will be appreciated that on the 15th December the Panamanian National Assembly - which is of course under the control of General Noriega - declared Panama to be in a state of war with the United States and gave full powers in those circumstances to General Noriega. The following day an unarmed, off-duty American serviceman was killed and this was followed by the harassment of other United States personnel, including threats to the wife of one of those personnel. Those were circumstances which were such that the United States believe they couldn't tolerate any longer. The White House has outlined and the President confirmed to me the limited aims of the intervention. They are firstly, to safeguard American lives. Secondly, to restore democracy in Panama and further, of course, to protect the integrity of the Panama Treaty obligations. The position is that the organisation of American States and the other governments including Australia, have rejected the Noriega regime. There will be no intention of course, for the United States to stay in there for any longer period than to achieve the limited and specific objectives which they have outlined. It's also significant to understand I believe, that the Panamanian representatives who were elected by democratic processes in May of this year have indicated their support for the United States action and those representatives, as we understand, have been sworn in as the legitimate representatives of Panama. Now those are the circumstances, some of which of course we were publicly aware of and which have been now confirmed to me by George Bush in the personal conversation he initiated with me this morning. I repeat that the Government of Australia regrets any circumstances where this sort of

military intervention is necessary but in the circumstances we understand the necessity that was perceived by the President and the Administration of the United States to take this action.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, have you had any advice on whether any Australian citizens might be in Panama at the moment?

PM: I've had no specific advice of any ... I guess it's certain that there would be some Australian citizens there. But I've had no advice of any in danger.

JOURNALIST: Did you receive any information of Noriega's whereabouts?

PM: No. At this stage the President was not aware. He said that - to use his language - there were any number of rabbit-holes into which he may have been able to scurry. Of course it is the intention of the United States to apprehend him and of course if possible to take him to the United States to face the drug charges that are levelled against him there.

JOURNALIST: Will Australia be taking any diplomatic initiatives in support of the American action?

PM: Well I would think that a clear statement I've made of an understanding of the position is to be seen and is intended to be seen as supportive.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

PM: No. I prefaced by the remarks I made here that we regret any circumstances that do arise where military intervention occurs and of course there'll be many circumstances in which one wouldn't support it. But I have indicated that we do understand that in the circumstances with which the President of the United States was faced, they had no alternative. I mean you have the situation where unanimously the Panamanian National Assembly declared Panama in a state of war with the United States. I may say that the President indicated to me that the fact of them declaring themselves at war with the United States hadn't induced a great sense of panic in the United States but when that was followed as it was, by the killing of an off-duty and unarmed American serviceman and then significant harassment of other United States personnel and including threats of a sexual nature to the wife of an American citizen, then a position had been reached in the context of that declaration of a state of war where the United States felt it could not tolerate that position any longer. And of course what we've got to understand is that there were these elections in May which were internationally observed and the observers indicated that those elected had been elected as a result of proper

process. That process was overthrown, rejected by General Noriega.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, in May Senator Evans said there will be serious issues of principle if America were to turn up intervention - his words a notch or two. There have been certain things that have changed since then but aren't there still issues of Panamanian sovereignty involved here?

PM: You have a situation in line with what the Foreign Minister said. I mean I don't think anyone is going to say that a declaration of a state of war on the part of Panama is an insignificant circumstance, a very significant change of circumstance. But as the President said, that of itself was not enough to initiate action. But when following that state of intention on the state of war on the part of Panama against the United States was then followed by the absolutely inexcusable killing of an off-duty and unarmed American serviceman, you have a very, very significant change of circumstances.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, did President Bush indicate what he would think was an acceptable time for the US to be in Panama?

PM: He indicated that he didn't want to be in there any longer than was necessary to achieve the limited objectives.

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