

STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
ON THE GULF CRISIS  
TUESDAY 4 DECEMBER 1990



Mr Speaker,

I wish to inform the House, and the people of Australia, of the Government's views on developments in the Gulf crisis, and of the Government's policies in response to those developments.

Members will know that on 29 November the Security Council of the United Nations passed an extremely grave Resolution. That Resolution is momentous, and in some respects it is quite unprecedented.

Resolution 678 authorises member-states of the United Nations, from 15 January 1991, to use all necessary means to uphold and implement the Security Council's previous Resolutions on the Gulf crisis. Essentially, those previous Resolutions call on Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait, and to release all hostages.

The Resolution also requests all states to provide appropriate support for actions taken under the Resolution.

The words 'all necessary means' carry a clear meaning in this resolution: they encompass the use of armed force to compel compliance with the Security Council's Resolutions.

The UN has often authorised the deployment of military forces to prevent conflict; but only once before has it authorised the use of armed force to compel compliance with its Resolutions. That was in Korea, forty years ago.

Korea is in that respect a precedent for the action which the Security Council has now taken. But in other respects, and in very important respects, this Resolution is quite unprecedented.

Never before has such a grave and momentous Resolution been so broadly supported. Honourable members will know that the Resolution was carried by a vote of twelve to two, with one abstention. They may not realise that the Resolution was actually sponsored by six members of the Council, including not just the United States and Britain, but also the Soviet Union, France, Canada and Romania.

The fact that both superpowers were prepared, with four other nations, to sponsor this Resolution shows in the most concrete terms that the nations of the world are overwhelmingly united in their condemnation of Iraq's aggression; and in their determination to do whatever it takes - to use all necessary means - to make sure Iraq's aggression is not allowed to stand.

In a century marked by terrible wars, uneasy peace and international distrust, this sort of response to armed aggression has proved an elusive dream. Now it is a reality.

Resolution 678 offers the best prospect of a just and peaceful resolution of the crisis. In passing Resolution 678 the Security Council is not seeking war. On the contrary, the Resolution, while explicitly contemplating the use of force if necessary, is founded on the hope that a clear statement of that preparedness will in fact avoid war.

As President Bush wrote to me in a letter over the weekend on his decision to seek high-level talks with the Iraqis,

"I know of your hope - which I share - that military force be used only as a last resort".

Resolution 678 is seeking to show Iraq's leaders, just as clearly as possible, that they must withdraw from Kuwait and release the hostages. The Security Council has given Iraq's leaders, in the words of the Resolution, 'one final opportunity, as a pause of goodwill, to do so.'

This Resolution is a stark signal, but Iraq's leaders have shown that no softer signal will move them. They have ignored statements from around the world condemning their actions, and they have ignored the concrete expression of that condemnation in the mandatory and comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the UN.

Those sanctions have been very widely complied with, and effectively enforced. Many countries, like Australia, have paid heavily in lost earnings, and many, including Australia, have contributed to enforcing the sanctions. Nothing could be more effective than these sanctions in persuading Iraq to get out of Kuwait, except the threat of armed force.

This Government has never ruled out the possibility that armed force may need to be used as a last resort to resolve the gulf crisis.

The question is, whether now is the right time to contemplate this further and graver step. Should the sanctions not be given longer to work? To answer that we have to clarify how the sanctions have been intended to work. Has their aim been to starve Iraqi people into submission, or has it been to show Iraqis leaders that the world would not accept their incorporation of Kuwait?

The answer is plain. The aim of the sanctions has been to prove to Iraq, both through the seriousness of the action itself, and through the great sacrifices which the sanctions have imposed already both on Iraq and on its former trading partners, that the world would not accept Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Starving Iraq's people into submission was not the UN's aim in imposing sanctions. That was implicit in the decision to allow exceptions in cases of humanitarian need. Nor do I believe that further economic hardship for Iraq's people is likely to change the minds of Iraq's leaders. Sanctions can be very powerful instruments of persuasion - as they have been in South Africa - but they cannot force the hand of a dictatorial leadership which is willing to ignore the interests of its people.

I am myself surprised and deeply disappointed that Iraq's leadership should have proven itself so resistant to the message of sanctions; surprised because no rational reading of Iraq's self-interest by its leaders should have allowed them to ignore the message the sanctions sent.

The sanctions have succeeded for over three months in virtually stopping all Iraq's trade with the rest of the world. And yet they have not succeeded in persuading Iraq's leaders to withdraw from Kuwait, nor to show the least sign of reconsidering their disastrous position.

Meanwhile the economic impact of the Gulf crisis is causing damage to fragile developing-country economies around the world, and the difficulty and uncertainty of relying on sanctions alone to resolve the crisis is becoming all too apparent.

We believe that it is therefore timely to send an even clearer signal - the clearest and strongest signal that can be sent - that Iraq must leave Kuwait. We believe the Resolution must improve whatever prospects there are that Iraq will withdraw. We believe that this Resolution offers the best prospect that war can be avoided.

Since Resolution 678 was passed, Iraq's apparent willingness to consider President Bush's offer of talks, to be held strictly within the framework of the UN Resolutions on the gulf crisis, shows that already Iraq may be re-assessing its position in the light of that Resolution.

But we recognise that the power of Resolution 678 depends on the acceptance by UN members that in the last resort it may be necessary to compel Iraq to comply with the UN's Resolution by force of arms. Otherwise it is empty; something that Iraq can shrug off; something that would fail to compel Iraq's leaders to address the terrible consequences of a refusal to withdraw; a missed opportunity to drive home the benefits for them and for their country of making a choice for peace.

The gravity of the situation makes it important to restate the reasons we believe that Iraq's actions must be reversed, even to the point of using armed force, and why we believe that important Australian interests are at stake.

Iraq's seizure of Kuwait was an act of pure aggression, motivated solely by the desire of Iraq's leaders to increase their territory, their wealth and their power. I would ask anyone who is inclined to credit Saddam Hussein's claims of a wider mission on behalf of the Arab people, to explain the incorporation of Kuwait as the nineteenth province of Iraq. I would ask them to explain the plundering of Kuwaiti property and the persecution of its residents.

And I would ask them to explain away the testimony before the Security Council last week by people who have fled from Kuwait. Even allowing for the exaggeration common in such circumstances, this testimony was indeed shocking.

As well, Australia has been deeply concerned by the consequences for the Middle East as a whole if Iraq's aggression was allowed to stand. Who could doubt that having swallowed Kuwait, a stronger Iraq would not then turn on its other neighbours? Who will explain how Iraq could then be prevented from establishing an hegemony over the entire region; an hegemony backed not only by chemical weapons, but sooner or later by nuclear weapons as well? And who could doubt the brutality of that hegemony?

These are not scare-mongering speculations. They are serious assessments of the regional consequences of allowing Iraq's aggression to stand. And they carry with them the terrible question - were we to turn a blind eye now, what still greater crisis, with what still greater stakes, would we have to act to resolve in the future, at what still greater cost?

These are crucial issues. They relate to the fate of vast numbers of our fellow human beings. But these humanitarian concerns do not stand alone. They stand alongside, and reinforce, important Australian interests which are deeply engaged in the Gulf.

First, Australia has a direct and immediate interest in the peace and prosperity of the Middle East. It is an important market for our products and an important source of imports. Australia needs the Gulf's oil, and our trading partners elsewhere in the world need the Gulf's oil. So stability in the Gulf is important to all Australians.

But most important of all, standing higher than all the factors I have mentioned, Australia has an interest in the establishment and maintenance of an international order based on the Charter of the United Nations. This has been from the outset, and remains, the Government's guiding principle in this crisis.

Our highest priority is to uphold the principles of the United Nations: that international disputes must not be settled by force; that national borders must be respected; and that aggressors must not be permitted to prevail.

Those principles were enshrined in the UN charter by the generation who saw the world slide into chaos in the 1930's, and who strove in 1945 to build an international order which would stop that happening again.

With the end of the Cold War the need to rebuild that order is urgent. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait proves the urgency of that need, and provides the first test of our ability to meet it. With the momentous changes - changes so much for the better - in the world political scene over the past few years the world community has a tremendous opportunity to achieve a more secure and just ordering of international relations; to try again to give effect to the principles to which the founders of the UN aspired.

The re-establishment of that order engages our direct interests as well as our sense of right and wrong. The security and prosperity of middle powers like Australia will in the years ahead depend directly on the strength of the UN's principles. And the strength of those principles in the years ahead depends absolutely on the support we give them today. To put it bluntly, if we or our neighbours were subject to aggression in the future, we would want, and we may need, the support of the UN. It is in our interests to support the UN today.

That support must include our recognition that the UN should be willing to defend its principles with armed force if necessary.

War is a terrible thing. Some people will find it paradoxical that the UN, as an organisation devoted to peace, should contemplate war. But that tragic paradox has to be accepted. It can be necessary to be prepared to fight, and in fact to fight, in order to secure peace in the future.

That necessity was recognised by the United Nations at its outset, and is inherent in its nature. No one knew the horrors of war better than the generation who built the UN. Dr Evatt, who as Australia's Foreign Minister played a leading role in establishing the UN, said in this House in 1945 that if economic or diplomatic sanctions

"are deemed inappropriate to the situation or prove ineffective, the Security Council may take any military action necessary to suppress the aggressor."

We would all fervently hope for a peaceful resolution. But if we rule out the use of force against a regime which has already used it, we have given up seeking a resolution at all. The international community would have simply acquiesced in Iraq's aggression.

For all these reasons, the Government unreservedly supports the United Nations Security Council Resolution 678.

Our support for the Resolution imposes on us an obligation to respond to the request, in its third paragraph, for all Nations to provide appropriate support for actions taken under the Resolution. I emphasise that the Resolution not only authorises all necessary means; it explicitly requests that member states provide support.

Members will be aware that the Government has provided support for the sanctions imposed earlier by the Security Council by deploying a task force of three ships of the RAN - two frigates and a supply ship - to help enforce the embargo against Iraq. Our ships have been performing that task with great distinction, and have played a major role in the multinational effort. They have brought credit to themselves and to their country.

The passage of Resolution 678 clearly requires us to consider whether we should extend the operational role of our task force to allow it to prepare for, and if necessary to participate in, operations envisaged by the Resolution.

In the light of the direct Australian interests which are engaged in the crisis, and in the light of our support for the specific measures contained in the Resolution, this Government believes that Australia should take this course.

I therefore inform the House that Australia is prepared to make our naval task force available to serve with allied forces in operations authorised by Resolution 678, should that become necessary.

Accordingly, if conflict occurs of a kind which is contemplated and authorised by the Resolution, our ships would be available to participate in action with the allied fleet in the Gulf, where they would be in a position to make an important contribution to its air-defence capabilities.

The Government will now authorise the ADF to deploy ships of our task force from the Gulf of Oman into the Persian Gulf to exercise and operate with allied naval forces in preparation for that role. The ADF will also now participate in allied military planning.

These steps need to be taken now because they are essential to ensuring that our ships are fully prepared to operate as safely and effectively as possible should conflict erupt. They do not formally commit Australian forces to any action; ADF units will remain at all times under Australian national command.

Our ships will operate principally with ships of the US, Britain and Canada, under US operational control. This is normal under such circumstances, and will contribute both to the effectiveness and to the safety of our ships and men.

Under these command arrangements, the roles and missions of our ships would be specified by the Chief of the Defence Force in conformity with Government decisions. The task force commander would be responsible for ensuring that specific tasks assigned to Australian ships conform to these specified roles and missions, and he would be required to refer any disagreements back to the CDF and the government for decision. In all circumstances Australia will retain priority over the assignment of our ships.

As well as maintaining the task force of three ships, the Government will send another two medical teams - totalling some twenty people - to join the two already serving on hospital ships in the Gulf.

It is not proposed to make any other contribution of naval, air or ground forces.

Australia's naval task force will be maintained at the present level of two combat ships and a supply ship. The frigates HMAS Darwin and HMAS Adelaide will leave the gulf region to return to Australia in the next day or two, after being replaced by the frigate HMAS Sydney and the destroyer HMAS Brisbane.

This is a significant commitment which is proportionate to the interests we have at stake and to our national resources. It is also a practical commitment. Our ships are in the area, and they are trained and equipped for this task. We are confident that they will be properly prepared for the role they may have to play.

Should conflict break out, naval forces in the Gulf could face a serious threat, particularly from Iraqi aircraft. The role of our ships will be to help defend against that threat. It will be a hazardous role. The decision I am announcing today is therefore a very serious one. I have consulted the Leader of the Opposition on it. In taking that decision I am fully conscious of the difficult task we are asking our navy to perform. We recognise the great contribution they are making to Australia, and to world peace.

I know there will be some who will ask why we should contribute in the Gulf when others do not. The essential answer is this - that what others do or don't do does not obviate our responsibility to judge for ourselves what is right, and what is in our interests, and to act accordingly. We also need to recognise that not only should we contribute, but unlike many others, we can contribute - we have a relevant capability to contribute.

I know there will also be some who cavil at the leading role being played in the Gulf by the United States. They will suspect that other nations who participate will only be serving American interests. That view is profoundly mistaken.

The US is certainly playing a leading role, as we would expect from a nation as wealthy and powerful as the US. Indeed, we would be disappointed if the US did not play such a leading role. But the US role has been clearly at one in this case with the wider interests of the international community, as demonstrated by the support for Resolution 678 in the Security Council.

There are even those who have purported to base their assessment of the Gulf situation on the presumption of moral equivalence between the US and Iraqi positions. If such views were to be taken seriously, it would reflect very poorly on the standard of our public debate. Let there be no ambiguity here - no mindless muddying of the waters. If it comes to conflict, the international community will not be the aggressor. The United States and the other allies will not be the aggressor. The aggressor is the nation that took, occupied and annexed Kuwait in August.

The Labor Party comes to this issue with a lot of history. For much of its one hundred years the ALP has struggled to ensure that Australia's armed forces are not used to fight other peoples' wars. In the 1930's that led Labor to turn its back on aggression, as so many others did in so many parts of the world.

But Labor learnt the lessons of that mistake, and did more than its share to correct it. Dr Evatt recognised not only that aggression must be resisted, wherever it occurs, and by armed force if need be. He also recognised that all nations must be prepared to contribute to that task. As he said in 1945:

"It must be made crystal clear that the nations seeking representation in the world organisation must be prepared to contribute their share of physical force to restrain the action of proved aggressors."

Since its establishment, Labor has been committed to strengthening the UN as the arbiter of a better world order. That is still our goal, more so than ever, as the passing of the Cold War brings the goal closer to our grasp. And we recognise the obligations which those aspirations impose on us as a nation.

Confident as I am of the importance of Australia's interests and the correctness of our approach, I cannot deny that the decisions we are taking are onerous indeed. Should it come to conflict, Australians may be involved in combat for the first time in nearly twenty years - albeit in very different circumstances. This is a heavy responsibility, but I and my Government will not shirk the exercise of that responsibility.

Before closing, it is important to restate what I have stressed before. The Australian Government and people have no ill-will to the people of Iraq, and wish them no harm. For their sake as much as for the rest of the world I earnestly hope that peace will prevail. If Iraq has genuine grievances they can be heard in recognised international forums, but not until Iraq has complied with the UN's resolutions.

Let me turn lastly to the issue which has been most constantly in our thoughts throughout this crisis; the situation of Australians, and of other foreign nationals, held in Iraq and Kuwait against their will.

We have all heard in the last twenty-four hours of suggestions - including from Iraq's Ambassador in Australia - that Australian hostages may soon be released. Of course we hope that is true. We say to Iraq, as we have said continually over recent months - let them all go.

Like all Australians - whatever we may think of Iraq's propaganda lottery being played out in Baghdad - I hope that as many of our people as possible may find their freedom through it. But I recognise, as most Australians do, that that lottery is entirely arbitrary. There is no way to guarantee the freedom of all our people, except perhaps by surrendering our policy and our national interests entirely to the hostage-taker. Most Australians understand that, including many of our people held in Iraq, as I know through correspondence with me. It does them great credit that they do understand that.

The only way to ensure the release of all our hostages is to resolve the crisis. And the only way to resolve the crisis is to press Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. That is what Resolution 678 is intended to achieve, and that is what our support for Resolution 678 is intended to achieve. We believe it is our best chance.

We see in Resolution 678 our best chance to get all the hostages home, to get Iraq out of Kuwait, to bring stability to the Middle East, and to take a vital step towards establishing a new world order in which nations like Australia can live in peace. That is why we have supported it by word, and that is why we will support it by deed.

We see in Resolution 678 the tragic necessity to confront aggression, if necessary with armed force.

And we see in Resolution 678 the hope that, through international cooperation, would-be aggressors will in future be deterred before they begin.

Mr Speaker, I finish on a practical note. In the light of the situation in the Gulf, and particularly of the timetable implied by Resolution 678, I have decided that I should not at this time plan to be away from Australia in January 1991. I have therefore decided that I will at this point defer my plans to travel to Europe at that time as had been planned.

One purpose of that visit had been to allow me to pursue Australia's interests in the Uruguay Round, if the Round is not concluded this year. I will of course remain committed to, and active in, pursuing these interests, including by travelling for direct talks at a different time if that is required.

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