



43

(2)

## PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

4 JULY 1991

International agreement has now been reached to prohibit mining in Antarctica. The last differences over the text of the Environment Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty have been resolved and the Protocol can now be signed in the near future.

The final step has been agreement by the United States - announced by President Bush this morning - to a compromise proposal on the outstanding issue of the circumstances under which a party could withdraw from the Protocol. I welcome the United States' decision and the agreement which it has now made possible.

The Protocol is the result of an initiative launched by Australia and France in mid-1989 to have the Antarctic Minerals Convention set aside in favour of a new agreement prohibiting mining in Antarctica and providing for more comprehensive environmental protection for that region.

When the United States had indicated in Madrid that it was not in a position to agree to a text proposed at that session, I wrote to President Bush urging United States concurrence.

The Protocol will establish a comprehensive environmental protection regime for Antarctica. Antarctica will become a "natural reserve devoted to peace and science" where mining is prohibited.

Stringent provisions would apply to any modification of the Protocol, including the lifting of the prohibition. A proposal to lift the mining prohibition could only be considered at a Review Conference after the Protocol has been in force for 50 years.

Any party wishing to mine after 50 years could only do so if a majority of all Antarctic Treaty parties, including three-quarters of the current 26 Antarctic Treaty Consultative parties, indicated that they wanted the prohibition lifted. Moreover, even if such agreement was reached, a number of other stages would have to be gone through before any mining could begin.

It is a great result, when it is considered that Australia, with France, started very much out on a limb when we called for a prohibition on mining.

I am very proud that Australia remained steadfast on this most important issue.