



## PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP

LEBANON: AUSTRALIAN OFFICIAL REPRESENTATION

I met yesterday a delegation of Australian-Lebanese community leaders to discuss the issue of Australian official representation in Beirut and related questions concerning immigration and consular services. The delegation presented a petition urging the Government to re-open the Australian Embassy in Beirut.

In response, I said that the Australian Government welcomed the improved situation in the Lebanon, but explained there were still concerns about the safety of diplomatic personnel in Beirut. In current circumstances, the cost of providing adequate protection for Australian diplomatic personnel would be prohibitive.

I assured the community leaders that the Australian Government would continue to monitor the situation carefully, and would re-establish an Embassy in Beirut as soon as conditions allowed. As demonstration of the Government's intention, a holding lease was being maintained on the original Embassy premises.

In the meantime, the Government was making efforts to meet the concerns of the Australian-Lebanese community for better access in Lebanon to Australian immigration and consular services.

Following his visit to Lebanon in September 1992, the Minister for Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, Mr Hand, had announced that the Government would establish in Beirut a locally-staffed special office to facilitate immigration and consular services. The purpose was to reduce the need for applicants to travel outside Lebanon to nearby Australian diplomatic missions to obtain these services.

I explained to the delegation that, as part of the process of establishing the special office in Beirut, the Government was giving high priority to the selection of a panel of local doctors to remove the need for travel outside Lebanon for medical examinations.

The Government expects the new arrangements will be in place in the near future. Taken together, they will mean that the overall need for travel outside Lebanon for immigration services will be dramatically reduced.

The new arrangements will remove the need for travel outside Lebanon for routine visa applications. In cases where an interview with an Australian immigration officer is required, travel outside Lebanon will still be necessary.

I assured the delegation that the new arrangements should be regarded as interim measures pending the restoration of resident Australian representation in Beirut. The Government very much hopes that conditions in Lebanon will soon permit the re-opening of the Australian Embassy.

CANBERRA

13 November 1992