



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP VISIT TO LAOS, THAILAND AND VIETNAM

On this visit to Laos, Thailand and Vietnam new understandings and agreements have been reached. Our relationship with the dynamic economies of Thailand and Vietnam has been put on a new plane. The foundations of regional security have been strengthened.

These were the objectives of my visit. They were the objectives because it is on these things which the interests of our country depend - the interests of this and future generations of Australians.

On them also depend, to no small extent, the well being of the countries of the region and their peoples.

This visit has gone some considerable way towards advancing the interests of Australia.

On this, as on other visits, I recognise that the office requires that I be Prime Minister, not just for Australians of this generation and future ones but for past generations of Australians.

Wherever possible, I have made it my practice to visit those places abroad which are sacred to the memory of Australians.

That is why in Thailand I went to Kanchanaburi and Hell Fire Pass. While there I made mention of those who served and died in Vietnam because they occupy the same esteemed place in our national memory as those who are buried in Thailand, but it was not possible in Vietnam to visit a place where Australians who served are buried.

We did not seek a memorial service in Vietnam principally because we decided there was no suitable place in Vietnam to conduct one, and also because I did not think it appropriate, while in Vietnam, to revive bitter memories.

I am dismayed by the misrepresentation of my views on this matter. The war was a trauma at the centre of our national life for more than a decade, no one who lived through that period can fail to have been affected by it - but, equally, as I have said before, no one who did not live through the war itself can know what it was like.

What we do know is what I said at the inauguration of the Vietnam Memorial in Canberra and repeated at Kanchanaburi - that those who died in Vietnam died with the same faith in Australia, with the same courage, the same willingness to lay down their lives for their country as those who died in other wars.

It was for this reason that the Government completed the Memorial. The Memorial and what was said there on the day of its inauguration finally brought Vietnam veterans in from the cold. It ensured that they received for the first time their proper recognition.

In Vietnam the war still weighs heavily on the lives of the people. Economic sanctions and the isolation of the country have kept it impoverished and underdeveloped. The wounds of war are far from healed.

I came here to lay the foundation of a mutually rewarding friendship between our two countries. I came to South-East Asia to hand over to Laos and Thailand the Friendship Bridge. I came in pursuit of a new creative partnership with the region.

I am the first Australian Prime Minister to visit Hanoi. As I said there on Monday night, I will certainly not be the last.

In the future Australian Prime Ministers will come to Vietnam regularly. And when they do, like me, they will remember those who suffered and died in that terrible conflict of the sixties and seventies - and I confidently expect that in due course they will be able to remember them at a suitable memorial.

HO CHI MINH CITY
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