



PRIME MINISTER

4 September 1996

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP DOORSTOP INTERVIEW, MAJURO

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PRIME MINISTER:

Ladies and gentlemen, I have now had an opportunity of examining President Clinton's statement and also the news reports of the American military action in Iraq. Australia both understands and supports the action taken by the United States. It was a proper response to a clear breach by Iraq of the broad conditions of Security Council Resolution 688 which interdicted the repression of civilian populations. Plainly, Iraq had been behaving in a manner inconsistent with the understanding reached at the conclusion of the Gulf War and in the circumstances, the action taken by the United States is justified. It does have the support of the Australian Government. We both understand and support the action taken by the United States. The information I have this morning is that the limited number of Australian citizens who are in the relevant area in Iraq are both safe and well. Their situation will of course be kept under very careful notice. I have been informed that a travel warning notice has already been issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in relation to travel in the affected area.

JRNLS:

Prime Minister, when was Australia first informed?

PRIME MINISTER:

I received a message overnight from President Clinton.

JRNLS:

You spoke with the President personally?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, no, no. He sent a message to me and that arrived in Canberra overnight.

JRNLST:

But you weren't informed prior to the strike action?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JRNLST:

Would you like to have been consulted in advance rather than just informed?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think in these circumstances it is my understanding that the number of countries that in fact were consulted in advance was very limited, including the United Kingdom whose refuelling facilities at Diego Garcia were used by the B 52s.

JRNLST:

Prime Minister, Mr Clinton said that this was a necessary force. Would you accept necessary force (inaudible)

PRIME MINISTER:

Well our position couldn't be plainer. We support the American action and that carries with it an obvious statement that it was an indicative of the appropriate use of force in the circumstances of what is happening.

JRNLST:

And fully covered by UN resolutions?

PRIME MINISTER:

It's a question of whether it is appropriate action. At the end of the day whether action taken is appropriate in all of the circumstances is what counts and it is the view of the Australian Government that it was appropriate action in all of the circumstances.

JRNLST:

Prime Minister, is there any role for Australian troops in this matter?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, there's been no suggestion of that and I wouldn't have thought that came into the equation. I don't think this issue should be either played down or played up. It is a limited military strike, quite specifically designed to reduce Iraq's air capacity. There are reports about its success. People will make their own assessments of that. I don't think it should be built up into anything more than that. Equally it's a very significant incident. Any incident that involves the use of military force of this kind is very significant but equally, I don't think we should get too melodramatic about it either.

JRNLSST:

Mr Howard, could there be a link between the timing of the strike and Bill Clinton's hopes for re-election in the Presidentials?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I am not going to get into American domestic politics. I look at the merits of what has happened and I am satisfied on the merits that the action taken is appropriate and justified. I am not going to make a comment on American politics. Yes Craig?

JRNLSST:

Last night Mr Clinton wouldn't rule out further action. What's your position on that?

PRIME MINISTER:

We will assess each individual element on its own merits but obviously if you are satisfied that behaviour by Iraq has justified some military response, it follows from that that a series of military strikes in the context of those same circumstances would probably be viewed in the same light but I can't and won't give a blank cheque in advance and nobody would expect me to.

JRNLSST:

The Australian ship on the way home from the Gulf, will it continue to return home?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JRNLSST:

What provision has there been for further briefings? I mean, for example there were some stories last night that some Americans were on the way to see you.

PRIME MINISTER:

I haven't made any arrangements to see any Americans here. I do understand that coincidentally Mr Winston Lord, who is the, I think, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Pacific or Far Eastern Affairs, was coming to the Marshall Islands, or is coming to the Marshall Islands but he won't be arriving here until Thursday evening. I will have returned home to Australia by Thursday evening. We are receiving fairly detailed briefings and my office has been in touch with our embassy in Washington, the State Department has been in touch, the usual sorts of things are being exchanged but once again I'd be happy to get any further information but I won't be seeing Mr Lord yet.

JRNLS:

Should the matter be now going straight to the Security Council to be dealt with urgently there?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think you have to look at it in both the context of the action being taken by America as leader of the allied force that waged the Gulf War and also in the context of Security Council action. I'm not at this stage suggesting other than that Iraq should, and I very strongly suggest this, Iraq should comply with the spirit of the original Security Council resolution, should respect the conditions laid down by the three monitoring powers, the United States, the United Kingdom and France at the conclusion of the Gulf War, and if that had occurred and the requests pursuant to that have been complied with, then this action by the United States would not have been necessary.

JRNLS:

On France, Prime Minister, last night a spokesman of the French Foreign Ministry expressed some concern about the action and made the point that they were informed and not consulted, and they certainly did not give their approval.

PRIME MINISTER:

France can speak for France and Australia will speak for Australia. I have stated Australia's position. Australia's position is one of both understanding and support.

JRNLS:

Mr Howard would you agree that the stark contrast between military action, in this case in response to obviously gross human rights violations in Iraq and violations of other places such as Burundi and many other places around the world, why is it we've got this inconsistent approach with the use of military force in response to the suppression of minorities?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don't think it's inconsistent. I believe that there was world wide support, quite

unprecedented world wide support for intervention when Iraq behaved as it did in the prelude to the Gulf War and what is now being done by the United States is by way of further enforcement of the stance taken across the world in response to the Iraqi action in late 1990.

Thank you.

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