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## Vietnam

### Ministerial Statement

**Sir Robert Menzies** (Kooyong – Prime Minister) – by leave – The House in recent weeks has conducted an important debate on foreign affairs in which the situation in Vietnam was fully and anxiously discussed. My colleague, the Minister for External Affairs (Mr. Hasluck) devoted a large part of his statement to Vietnam, explaining developments there and the critical significance of those developments for South and South East Asia as a whole. Nor of course do the implications end with South and South East Asia. Whether an externally directed Communist guerrilla subversion is to succeed or fail has world wide consequence. It has particular consequence for Australia.

In the first half of 1962 the Government decided, following upon a request from the Government of South Vietnam, that Australia should contribute militarily to the defence of South Vietnam. We sent at that time a group of some 30 military instructors to provide military training assistance. Since then additional military aid has been provided. The strength of the Army training team was, in the first place, doubled, and later still – comparatively recently – increased to 100. A flight of six Caribou transport aircraft has been provided. We have progressively increased our programme of economic aid to South Vietnam so that it now runs at the rate of about £1 million a year. A devoted body of Australian experts is at present at work in different parts of South Vietnam, experts in agriculture and the like. In addition to Australia and the United States, some thirty other countries are providing assistance or have undertaken to do so in the military or non-military aid fields. This includes assistance from a significant and important group of Asian countries, including the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Thailand and the Republic of Korea, who are contributing either economic or military aid.

The Australian Government is now in receipt of a request from the Government of South Vietnam for further military assistance. We have decided – and this has been after close consultation with the Government of the United States – to provide an infantry battalion for service in South Vietnam. In case there is any misunderstanding, I think I should say, Sir, that we decided in principle some time ago – weeks and weeks ago – that we would be willing to do this if we received the necessary request from the Government of South Vietnam and the necessary collaboration with the United States. This is not to be regarded as something that has suddenly arisen out of more recent events.

There can be no doubt of the gravity of the situation in South Vietnam. There is ample evidence to show that with the support of the North Vietnamese regime and other Communist powers, the Vietcong has been preparing on a more substantial scale than hitherto insurgency action designed to destroy South Vietnamese Government control, and to disrupt by violence the life of the local people. The rate of infiltration of guerrillas from North Vietnam has been increasing and last year rose to some 10,000. The infiltration of a battalion of the North Vietnamese regular Army has recently been confirmed.

We have not of course come to this decision without the closest attention to the question of defence priorities. We do not and must not overlook the point that our alliances, as well as providing guarantees and assurances for our security, make demands upon us. We have commitments to Malaysia which we are meeting. We have to bear in mind, and make preparations against, the possibility of other developments in the region which could make demands on our Australian defence capacity.

Assessing all this, it is our judgment that the decision to commit a battalion in South Vietnam represents the most useful additional contribution which we can make to the defence of the region at this time. The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The task of holding the situation in South Vietnam and restraining the North Vietnamese is formidable. But we are conscious of the magnitude of the effort being made by the Government and people of South Vietnam in their own defence. In recent months the United States has taken historic decisions to extend further military assistance to South Vietnam. South Korea has also committed substantial forces.

We have noted and welcomed the attempts to open the way to agreement which have been made, so far unsuccessfully, by President Johnson and by the Prime Minister of Britain through his representative, Mr. Gordon Walker. We also welcome President Johnson's proposals for a wide-ranging economic programme. We will certainly continue to play our part in the economic development of the region.

I make it clear that the Government has no desire to have Australian forces in Vietnam any longer than is necessary to ensure the security of South Vietnam. In terms, that is practically what President Johnson said quite recently about the presence of American forces in Vietnam. We and our allies are not seeking to take over North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese must not take over South Vietnam by armed force or subversion.

Let me add one item to my statement. Arguments have been going on for some time, publicly and privately, about this matter. Some attempt has been made occasionally – I do not think in this House – to suggest that we are in some way at odds with the United States on this question. Therefore, I am happy to tell the House that today I received from the President of the United States of America a message which I have his full authority to make public.

**Mr. James** – Oh!

**Sir Robert Menzies** – Yes, I am like that. I never publish a message without having full authority to make it public. Therefore, the honorable gentleman may be interested to hear it. I do not assume for a moment that he will like it, but I think he ought to hear it. It is in these terms –

Dear Mr. Prime Minister: I am delighted at the decision of your Government to provide an infantry battalion for service in South Vietnam at the request of the Government of South Vietnam.

This action simply underscores the full co-operation and understanding that has existed between our two Governments, and between both and the Government of South Vietnam, in assisting South Vietnam to maintain its independence. Like you, we have no desire to maintain military forces in Vietnam any longer than necessary to ensure the security of South Vietnam. But we share your belief that we must both respond to the needs brought about by the aggression being carried on from North Vietnam.

More broadly, this action proves again the deep ties between our two countries in the cause of world peace and security. As you know, my personal experiences in association with Australians during World War II have made this a particularly deep and abiding feeling for me. I am confident that our two nations, working together, can continue to make great contributions to checking the spread of aggression and to bringing about the peace that South Vietnam and South East Asia deserve.

*Sincerely yours,*

*Lyndon B. Johnson*

I present the following paper –

Vietnam – Ministerial Statement, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1965.

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