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STATEMENT OF NEW ZEALAND ATTITUDE ON THE VIETNAM PROBLEM

By

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Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The special significance of the Vietnam war is that in an acute form it has confronted New Zealanders with the realities of their international position. At the heart of the debate over the Government's decision lies a choice - of adhering to the basic principles which have guided the country's foreign policy ever since it assumed full responsibility for its own destiny, or of abandoning them for uncertain and untried courses of action.

I am convinced that those basic principles - support for the purposes of the United Nations Charter, resistance to aggression, defence of the rights of small states, participation in collective security arrangements and assistance to other countries in their economic and social development - remain valid and should continue to guide New Zealand's actions. I am convinced too that the Government has applied them as scrupulously to the Vietnam situation as it has to every other major international question. The fundamental issues involved are starkly simple. Whose will is to prevail in South Vietnam - the imposed will of the North Vietnamese communists and their agents, or the freely expressed will of the people of South Vietnam? Or more explicitly, are terror and armed aggression to succeed?

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A Clear Case of Aggression

It is striking that many of those who questioned the Government's decision to commit New Zealand troops two years ago no longer deny, as they did then, the facts concerning North Vietnam's direct and massive responsibility for the conduct of the war in the South. Many continue, however, to deny that aggression is involved - on the grounds that Vietnamese are fighting Vietnamese and that the war is therefore only a civil war. Such a view to my mind evades not only the special circumstances of the Vietnam conflict, but also the clear record of international precedent. To my mind, the facts of aggression are as decisive as they were in the case of North Korea's attack on South Korea, where the communist North Korea fought against the free South Koreans, or as they would be if East Germany sent its forces across the dividing line into West Germany. It is true that there are superficial resemblances to a civil war. But the conflict is much more than that, and much more too than an armed insurrection by a purely local communist movement. It is incontrovertible that the Viet Cong - itself largely directed, sustained and supplied by North Vietnam - has been backed up by military forces sent in from North Vietnam. In the face of such blatant external interference and attack, South Vietnam had no alternative, if it wished to preserve its rights to determine its own future, to calling for outside assistance. And it had every right to do

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New Zealand's Record of Assistance

New Zealand, as a member of SEATO, was one of the countries to which South Vietnam appealed. Our decision to give what assistance we could, military as well as civilian, was not lightly taken. But to those aware of the central elements of our foreign policy it should have afforded no surprise. We undertook to help for the same reasons that we went to the assistance of South Korea and Malaysia. In all three cases, aggression had been committed, the peace and security of Asia were threatened, and legal, treaty and moral obligations were involved.

It is startling that New Zealand's military involvement in Vietnam has evoked criticism while our activity in Malaysia has not. Why should that be when the purposes which New Zealand has sought in both countries have been the same. Since the war there have been two security situations in Malaysia. First there was the 12-year emergency in what was then called Malaya. It is true that in that situation the numbers involved on either side cannot compare with the gigantic scale of the war in Vietnam. Yet the issues at stake were identical. In Malaya, as in Vietnam, the communists attempted to take over the lawful government of the country, using all the now familiar tactics of terror and subversion. They failed, but only after a costly and

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protracted campaign in which of course New Zealand forces played a part. This role was not seriously questioned in New Zealand. The second security situation was Indonesia's campaign of armed attack against what had then become Malaysia. New Zealand, with virtually unanimous public support, joined in a combined Commonwealth effort to resist this aggression. The parallel with Vietnam is a direct one. There is no doubt in my mind that, having concluded that armed aggression was being committed against South Vietnam, New Zealand was under a strong obligation to lend weight to joint action to resist that aggression, just as we had done in Malaysia.

The Prospects for the Future

What, now, are the prospects for the future? The objectives of South Vietnam and its allies are simply, to induce North Vietnam to abandon its aggression, to ensure that South Vietnam is free to decide its own future in accordance with the wishes of its people, and to work for a more stable and sensible means of solving the problems of South-east Asia. Obviously these objectives can best be secured through a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam conflict. But the North Vietnamese have bluntly rejected the many initiatives made to get discussions under way. They have shown no interest in a settlement other than one which would mean handing over South Vietnam to their control.

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In this situation three courses could be followed: an all-out assault against North Vietnam which could rapidly bring that country to its knees but which would involve the risk of a major conflict; abandonment of the South Vietnamese people to communist dictatorship; or a continuation of the present limited military measures, including the bombing of military installations and supply routes in the North. I have no doubt that so long as the bulk of the South Vietnamese people remain determined to resist North Vietnamese aggression - the third course is the right one for New Zealand to support.

Forces for Vietnam

There is no question about New Zealand's commitment to this allied policy. But that is not the end of the matter. The Government has constantly to judge the size and nature of the contribution which should be made to the joint effort, in the light of developments in Vietnam, the limited military capacity of our country, and our commitments in other areas of South-east Asia.

In the exercise of this judgment we are in no sense subservient to the policies, attitudes and wishes of any of our allies with interests in Asia. We naturally value opportunities to discuss with our allies political possibilities in Vietnam and the progress

of the fighting. We recognise that we are only one of many countries which are determined to help the Government of South Vietnam, in different ways, to withstand communist aggression. We recognise, too, that set against the immensity of the need, our contribution is small. But I have made it clear that if in our judgment the situation demands it and our capacities allow, the Government will not shrink from strengthening its assistance to Vietnam in appropriate ways, military and other, in accordance, of course, with the wishes of the Government of South Vietnam. However, let there be no misunderstanding. Whatever judgments we reach, whatever decisions we take, they will be ours alone.

We exercise the same independence of approach towards problems arising from the conduct of the war and the search for a political settlement. For the most part our opinions of such issues are expressed in confidential exchanges with our allies. But on at least one - the bombing of North Vietnamese military targets - I think it important that there be clear public understanding of our viewpoint.

The Bombing of North Vietnam

The bombing of North Vietnam is a direct consequence of the decision of the Government of the North to seek to impose its

will on South Vietnam by force of arms. The purpose of the bombing, along with the other military measures being taken, is to frustrate that attempt by hindering the infiltration of men and the flow of military supplies from the North to the South and by generally raising the cost of aggression. The bombing then is a part of the overall military effort made by the allies to check North Vietnamese attacks. It is true that infiltration has continued, sometimes at a high level. But the bombing has achieved important results. It has without doubt hampered North Vietnam's capacity for major military operations in the South and by so doing has saved the lives of thousands of allied and South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.

I would hasten to add, however, that while the Government accepts the military necessity for the bombing of military targets in North Vietnam, we have always been anxious to work towards a mutual scaling down of military activities in Vietnam. We have always recognised that another suspension of the bombing could be an important step in this process. This matter was discussed very fully with the recent mission from the United States and the President's advisers repeated the United States Government's well-known readiness to stop the bombing the moment North Vietnam gives a reliable sign that it is prepared to

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undertake some reciprocal step to reduce its military activity in the South or to make some meaningful advance towards a political settlement. This, however, the North Vietnamese Government has consistently refused to do. The United States Government has on five occasions ordered a halt in the bombing in the hope of evoking some favourable and constructive response from the North Vietnamese. One of these pauses was for 37 days. The only North Vietnamese reaction was to exploit the opportunity to increase the flow of men and military equipment to the South which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives in the South.

Discouraging as these experiences have been, I feel that the circumstances could still arise in which a further pause in the bombing could be tried. At the same time I am convinced that any responsible national leader who urged such a course upon the United States would need to have taken full account of the existing military situation and of the human and military cost of past pauses. He would need too to have at least some confidence in the prospect of a favourable reaction from North Vietnam. Otherwise I see no escape from a recent observation by Mr Rusk: "We do not believe that prospects for a settlement are enhanced by proposals which ask us to stop half the war while the other side continues unabated its half of the war.

Suppose that the United States were to say that we would negotiate

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only if the other side stopped all of the violence in South Vietnam while we continued to bomb the North. Everyone would say that we were crazy. When the other side makes exactly the same proposal in reverse, why do many people say that their proposal is reasonable and ought to be accepted?"

I am as concerned as anyone that the fighting in Vietnam should not be extended into a wider war. But I do feel that if a case is to be made against escalation it must embody a broad perspective, must pay due regard to the care with which allied objectives are sought, and must give due account to the actions of North Vietnam. It is entirely wrong that the allies alone should be held responsible for escalation, especially since most of their actions are a response to North Vietnamese measures and are, to my knowledge, pursued with the closest possible regard to the risks involved. I am sure that if more attention were directed to such North Vietnamese acts as the mining of the port of Saigon, the abuse of Cambodian territory and the infringement of the demilitarized zone, the purpose and deliberate restraint of allied military operations would be better understood. It is all too easily forgotten that the allies are seeking limited ends in Vietnam. No one is seeking to overthrow North Vietnam or to topple its communist regime, even though it is one of the

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most cheerless and heartless on earth. The United States commands fantastic military power but its use of that power has been reluctant, graduated, and concerned to limit civilian casualties and damage. It stands in direct and vivid contrast to the terror and atrocities deliberately employed by the Viet Cong through South Vietnam.

Undeniably, the savagery of the Vietnam war, initiated by the Viet Cong, gives it a special moral dimension. I am as conscious of this as any other New Zealand citizen and I long to see the war ended. But surrender, or a fraudulent peace, would be no answer to the issues posed by communist aggression. Where men and nations seek to achieve unjust ends by force and violence, men who value freedom have a right to assistance in defending themselves. Out of all the horror of Vietnam, one thing emerges clearly - the refusal of the people of South Vietnam to support the National Liberation Front or to submit to force. That being so, I fail to see how we can do otherwise than give what help we can, in both military and civilian fields, until the threat of aggression is averted and the foundations for a lasting settlement are laid.

Has a Stalemate Been Reached?

What are the prospects of this? Are allied sacrifice and

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effort leading to progress? Or has nothing more been achieved than a stalemate which may last a very long time?

Real progress has been and is still being achieved in both military and political spheres. The communist forces have been defeated wherever they have been found in strength, and it appears that there is no longer any risk that they will succeed in their objective of subjugating the South. The secure areas of South Vietnam have been extended, so that many more of the people may live in peace, without fear of Viet Cong atrocities. Roads and waterways are being cleared, and development of South Vietnam's economy is taking place.

Full economic reconstruction cannot of course take place until after the war. Nevertheless a marked degree of economic stability has already been achieved. At the same time, even in the midst of war, nation-building projects, such as hydro-electric schemes are going ahead. Nor should it be overlooked that, destructive as war invariably is, when the conflict is at last over, South Vietnam will be left with a chain of new ports, new airfields, new roads, and a reservoir of manpower trained in skills of value to Vietnam's future development. These things are in themselves an unequal compensation for the sacrifices which the Vietnamese people have undergone; even so,

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they provide an earnest that once a settlement is achieved the Vietnamese people will have a foundation on which to construct the free life and wider opportunities for which they have given so much.

I attach particular significance to achievements in the political field. Despite the hazards of war and the efforts of the enemy, elections have been held at several levels in South Vietnam. A new constitution has been drawn up by a freely chosen Constituent Assembly and recently, despite a determined and ruthless attempt by the Viet Cong to wreck the elections, the South Vietnamese people went to the polls in large numbers to choose the men who are to lead their Government. By any standards, this is an impressive achievement but the fact that these elections were held freely in a country torn by war and comparatively untutored in the traditions of parliamentary democracy is remarkable indeed.

Much of course remains to be done. The important consideration, however, is that the basis has been laid for the development of a stable, broadly-based, and representative form of government. The South Vietnamese have shown that they reject utterly the communist blue-print for the future of their country and they have indicated firmly that they wish to follow

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the path of free democratic government. If the various political groupings in South Vietnam can now put their differences aside and work together for the common good of their country then we may be at the starting point of a new and more hopeful period. Certainly the stage has been set for new efforts to further the social revolution which is under way in South Vietnam and to pursue the search for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. This could, if only the North Vietnamese will face up to the startling changes which have occurred in South Vietnam, be a turning point in the long struggle for peace in Vietnam.

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