

(Embargo: Not to be
published or broadcast
before 6 a.m. Wednesday
1st June, 1965)



DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
CANBERRA.

FOR THE PRESS

(Released only in Canberra)

PR 60

1st June, 1965.

REPLY TO SOVIET NOTE ON VIETNAM

The following is the text of the reply to the statement of 15th May by the Government of the Soviet Union commenting on the Australian Government's decision to send an infantry battalion to South Vietnam.

"On 15th May the Government of the Soviet Union, in a statement handed to the Australian Ambassador, commented on the Australian Government's decision to send an infantry battalion to assist in the defence of South Vietnam. The Soviet statement expressed support for the North Vietnamese protest against the Australian decision.

The Australian Government has noted the Soviet Government's statement and regrets that it is based on a distortion of the situation in Vietnam. The "direct and unprovoked aggression against the Vietnamese people" to which the Soviet statement refers in fact emanates from Hanoi, through its control and direction of the Vietcong in South Vietnam. In 1962, the International Control Commission in Vietnam found that North Vietnam had violated Articles 10, 19, 24 and 27 of the 1954 Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam. Further irrefutable evidence of continuing North Vietnamese violations on an increasing scale, including the presence in South Vietnam of units of the North Vietnamese regular army, has since been accumulated and must be known to the Soviet Government.

The 1954 Geneva Agreement provided that neither North nor South Vietnam should be used for the resumption of hostilities or to further an aggressive policy. These obligations, accepted by North Vietnam under the solemn cover of an international agreement, have been flagrantly violated by the introduction of troops, with the purpose of undermining the Government in Saigon and imposing the will of the North Vietnamese regime on the people of South Vietnam. Faced with this threat to its territory and its independence, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam has found it necessary to seek assistance from other countries, including Australia.

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The Australian Government, while not itself a party to the 1954 Geneva Agreements, took note of them and undertook to apply the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including Article 2(4), in regard to the settlement in Vietnam. The Australian Prime Minister said publicly, when the Agreements were concluded, that Australia would view aggression in violation of the Indo-China settlement as a threat to international peace and security. The action now taken by the Australian Government is in accordance with the attitude it has consistently adopted towards the Geneva Agreements. Moreover, the provision of Australian assistance to South Vietnam is in no way contrary to international law. The right of individual or collective self-defence is an acknowledged right in international law and is recognised in the Charter of the United Nations.

North Vietnamese efforts to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Vietnam by military means have been supported and reinforced through channels established by the authorities in Hanoi for infiltrating armed personnel and materials into South Vietnam. It is these channels in North Vietnam which have been under attack and not the people or the authorities there. It is the authorities in North Vietnam who have, to use the words of the Soviet statement, acted "in violation of the most elementary norms of international laws"; and it is they who must bear the heavy responsibility for the action which the United States and South Vietnam have been forced to take against military installations and communications in North Vietnam. If infiltration into, and aggression against, South Vietnam is stopped there would be no need for such action.

The Soviet Government expressed the view in its statement that the Australian Government assumed "a serious responsibility for the consequences of its actions" in giving military assistance to South Vietnam. The Australian Government's decision was taken after the most careful consideration and in the conviction that there was no other way, as long as North Vietnam and its supporters refuse to live in peace with neighbouring countries, to defend the freedom and independence of the people of South Vietnam, and indeed of other countries in South East Asia whose independence would be threatened if aggression against South Vietnam were allowed to succeed.

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The Australian Government recalls the statement by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, in his letter to the Australian Prime Minister of 31st December, 1963, that the question of unification in Germany, Korea and Vietnam "must be decided by the people and governments of these States themselves without interference and pressure from outside", and that "in the solution of these questions it is necessary to renounce the use of force". The use of force to impose a settlement in Vietnam was decided on, not by the Republic of Vietnam or the countries friendly to it, but by the authorities in Hanoi, encouraged and abetted by the authorities in Peking. It is they also who introduced interference and pressure across the internationally recognised demarcation line between North and South Vietnam. The Australian Government considers that the influence of the Soviet Government should be directed, not towards governments such as Australia which are assisting South Vietnam in its legitimate right of self-defence against aggression, but towards the authorities in Hanoi and Peking who have it in their power to remove the causes which have given rise to the existing situation in Vietnam and elsewhere in the area. The Australian Government believes that in this way the Soviet Government could contribute significantly towards the strengthening of world peace, the reduction of international tensions and the development of peaceful relations between States with differing social systems."

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