

Viet Nam

an imminent political agreement, will cease to participate in the ICCS by June 30, 1973. All the parties will by then have had adequate time to carry out those provisions which the ICCS was created to supervise, perhaps even the holding of elections on which I will have something to say later. If the South Vietnamese parties now meeting in Paris are able to reach an early accord on internal matters as envisaged and encouraged in the Paris agreement of January 27 our decision will present no obstacle.

One important aspect of the agreement assigns a task to the ICCS, not in the field of truce observing but in contributing to the political settlement which alone can bring about the end of the war. The agreement calls for an election to form a new national government. The ICCS protocol assigns an undefined observer role to the ICCS. The meetings now going on between the two South Vietnamese parties are intended to produce the conditions under which the election should be held. This electoral function is distinct and separate from the other functions assigned to the ICCS and the rules have yet to be elaborated. It could therefore be dealt with separately. So far as Canada is concerned, regardless of our status in respect of other aspects of the agreement, we would remain ready and available to serve, as the parties may wish, in helping to supervise an election provided it was called under the provisions of the agreement. It would not apply to an election called in other circumstances.

Canada will also inform the four parties to the Paris agreement that as Canada neither negotiated nor signed the Paris agreement we do not regard ourselves as bound by its provisions beyond the extent to which those who did sign it consider themselves bound. This was in fact one of our earliest conditions of service. Consequently, we will leave or otherwise regulate our deployment at any time if the parties who signed the agreement show, by their actions, that they no longer regard themselves bound by it. The resumption of large scale hostilities or any action tantamount to a direct denial by the parties of their obligations under the agreement would, in the government's view, relieve Canada of further responsibility to the ICCS. Should this decision be forced upon us, the government will state its reasons for withdrawal publicly.

• (1420)

I am not predicting that the arduous and skilful work involved in reaching this agreement will be nullified by an early escalation of hostilities. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of evidence that the means to resume the war are readily available and there is, unfortunately, also reason to think that this possibility is not excluded from the calculations of some at least of the parties concerned. We shall reassess the situation again before the end of May and give our definitive view at that time.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I should state that in the time remaining to us in the commission we will continue to maintain the objective and open approach we have taken until now and endeavour to see that the ICCS fulfils not only the psychological part that has been superimposed on it but also the duties as laid down in the agreements. We will not take part in a charade nor will we tacitly condone inaction when we believe action is required.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Wagner (Saint-Hyacinthe): Mr. Speaker, we understand and share the qualms with which the government must have made this decision. This problem is tormenting the hearts of all Canadians, I say this quite objectively; I am aware of the difficulties that the cabinet members have had to consider.

When the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp) returned home, it was clear to us that what he had seen of the situation over there had him bewildered and perhaps—if it is not too strong a word—pessimistic. We could see immediately that Canada was on the horns of a rather cruel dilemma. On the one hand, the effectiveness of the ICCS and the safety of our observers were at stake. On the other hand, various countries were pressing for us to accept a role that we had, in fact, already agreed to play. So the Secretary of State for External Affairs had the choice of leaving our force over there and working towards peace in that way, or else leaving Viet Nam and refusing to be associated with what seemed to be the illusion of keeping the peace. The hon. minister has chosen to set back the time limit by 60 days. In doing so, he has conceded priority to the higher interests of peace, and is thus displaying his hope that time will heal all.

[English]

Quite apart from the merits of the decision just announced by the Secretary of State for External Affairs there remains the issue of why the minister and the government would not and could not consult parliament on this matter. The minister may have assumed that parliament would not have extended the force's mandate at all. It is that type of assumption that continues the tradition of this government in the area of underestimating the compassion and understanding that other parties in this chamber have for Canada's international role.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wagner: For the record, Mr. Speaker, my party continues to protest the way in which this decision was made. Moreover, we pledge to continue to raise those questions both here and in committee to which Canadians who have concerns about this decision have the right to answers. That is our responsibility to the people of Canada. That is our responsibility to those who are serving Canada in Viet Nam.

It is no doubt probable that our options as a nation became more and more limited as every day of our stay in Viet Nam passed. In the debate on the original motion presented by the minister, we raised the futility of considering a withdrawal after 60 days in terms of the effect that withdrawal would have on the over-all arrangement in Viet Nam. Nevertheless, the fact that the final decision has been put off for another 60 days in no way limits the gravity of that decision.

The minister assured us on his return, and he repeated the statement this afternoon, of the degree to which other nations in the world wanted us to remain. I say to him now that this recommitment for 60 days must be accompanied by fresh diplomatic initiatives to gain acceptance of our conditions.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!