

Viet Nam

• (2100)

In 1964, in the Cyprus debate, the then leader of the opposition, the right hon. member for Prince Albert (Mr. Diefenbaker) said: "This action tonight is but one more step in the constitutional development and final establishment of the principle that we in this nation will not send our troops abroad without a decision by parliament." What we are asking is that this principle enunciated and upheld by distinguished leaders of more than one party and from both sides of this House should be recognized again. We invite members of all parties, including the government, to adhere to this principle once more and to say that again in this instance it will be parliament that will decide our course.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the conclusion of the agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Viet Nam. One really does not have to spend a long time recalling the horror, devastation, brutality and futility of the long drawn-out war to be wholeheartedly in favour of steps to restore peace in Viet Nam. No doubt the agreement contains a lot of vague undertakings and ambiguous phrases. Nevertheless, it is an instrument by which it is possible to restore peace. I therefore support any Canadian initiative or any reasonable step designed to make the agreement work. For this reason I support Canada's participation in the International Commission of Control and Supervision.

It is not difficult to be sceptical. The agreement has been described as a fragile document, and so it is. It has been frequently said, and indeed it is obvious, that the good faith of the immediate parties to it is fundamental to its success. But given that good faith, I believe we should not be without hope that the agreement can be an instrument of establishing the general peace in Southeast Asia. I think it is essential that the four conditions laid down by the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Sharp) be strictly adhered to and, as has been indicated by my leader in this debate, we in the New Democratic Party believe that certain other conditions should also be included.

There are two reasons for insisting on conditions. One is that the safety of Canadian personnel committed to the international commission is our responsibility, and conditions must be established to give reasonable security for their safety. Second, it is important that the commission be able to do the task assigned to it. We cannot afford to repeat the classical history of the International Control Commission which remained in being long after the parties had torn up and totally disregarded the agreement which they were supposed to be supervising. Indeed, it is that history that is responsible, in my judgment, for so much of the reluctance and doubt of the Canadian people about taking part in the present observer team operation.

However, I propose to concentrate my remarks on what I think is a vital condition required to demonstrate the good faith of at least one of the parties to the agreement, and essential if Canada is to continue to participate in the operation. I refer to the plight of the 200,000 or so civilian political prisoners detained in pitiful conditions in South Viet Nam. The subject has already been mentioned by the

hon. member for Fundy-Royal (Mr. Fairweather) and I wish to develop it.

Reliable sources, including representatives of the World Council of Churches, Amnesty International of England, and the Friends Service Committee have painted the picture in sombre colours. I take my account from the report of one David Tecwin made to Amnesty International of England on December 8, 1972, which says that underfed, overcrowded and often held in pitiful conditions, the civilians detained in South Viet Nam probably number well over 100,000. In addition, there are 40,000 prisoners of war held in Phyl Quoc, an island off the south coast of Cambodia.

Many of the civilians are communists or communist sympathizers not eligible for prisoner of war status under the terms of the 1949 Geneva convention. Many are neutralists, members of that large section of the political community that does not wish to be governed by the National Liberation Front, the Viet Cong, nor by the current régime of President Nguyen Van Thieu. But a large number of those behind bars are simply the unlucky ones, men, women and children detained without trial because they were found in areas overrun by the communists and retaken by government forces. They are not interested in politics. Caught up in the mess of war, they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Their plight is illuminated in a series of letters smuggled out of the largest and most notorious of South Viet Nam's civilian prisons, the huge camp complex on the island of Con Son off the southeast coast. Con Son prison made headlines two years ago when two American congressmen stumbled across the human "tiger cages". These are pits in the ground and are still in use. "Difficult" cases are, reportedly, still shackled inside and disciplined by having powdered lime poured down on them.

The smuggled letters describe with little evident emotion the chaos and confusion that reigned in Con Son in recent months as the fighting dragged on. In many prisons and interrogation centres spread throughout the country, torture and physical ill-treatment are common. Detailed reports have been received of the beatings, electric shock treatment and other more sophisticated methods used in the interrogation and detention centres in the country.

When I was in Hanoi I had the opportunity to talk to persons who had escaped from these detention centres and who gave their accounts of systematic torture. The agreement on ending the war contains certain references which establish, I believe, the responsibility of the government of South Viet Nam to release these civilian prisoners. It also establishes some responsibility on the part of the International Commission of Control and Supervision.

The agreement, of course, provides—and we rejoice in this—for the release of United States military personnel within 60 days, and this process is already under way. Article 8 of the agreement also provides for the return of Vietnamese civilian personnel captured and detained in South Viet Nam. It provides that this question will be resolved by the two South Vietnamese parties on the basis of the principles of article 21(b) of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Viet Nam of July 20, 1954. It goes on to say the two South Vietnamese parties will do so; in