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SECRETARY
OF STATE
FOR EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS.

SECRÉTAIRE
D'ÉTAT AUX
AFFAIRES
EXTÉRIEURES.



STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY
OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
THE HONOURABLE MITCHELL SHARP,
IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,
APRIL 9, 1973

Mr. Speaker, it is my very sad duty officially to inform the House that Captain Charles Eugene Laviolette of the Canadian Armed Forces, on assignment to the Canadian Delegation to the International Commission of Control and Supervision, was killed in the line of duty on Saturday April 7 when the International Commission helicopter in which he was a passenger crashed near Lao Bao in Viet-Nam with the loss of all 9 persons on board. I know that all Members of the House, and all Canadians, join with the Government in extending sincere condolences to the wife and family of Captain Laviolette and share their deep sense of grief at this tragic event which has befallen them.

The sadness and grief caused by this incident does not affect Canadians only. One Indonesian officer and two Hungarian officers were also killed, as were two Americans and one Filipino, crew members on the helicopter, and two Viet Cong or PRG Liaison officials accompanying the party. We are relieved, however, that the other two Canadians, Captain R.L. Parsons and Master Corporal J.M.R. Laplante, who were passengers in another helicopter on the same mission which went to the aid of the stricken aircraft, are now safe and in good health.

The Canadian Government deplors this tragic and unnecessary incident which, according to preliminary investigation and reports, was the result of a hostile act directed, either deliberately or by mistake, against helicopters which were clearly marked with ICCS insignia. One helicopter was struck by a missile fired from the ground, presumably by the party in whose area of occupation the incident occurred, while it was approaching Lao Bao on an ICCS mission. This happened despite the fact that all the safety procedures and precautions designed specifically to prevent such incidents had been carefully followed. The team had secured the Viet Cong's assurances of safe passage, as witnessed by the presence of two of their representatives on the stricken helicopter, and according to our information, the helicopters did not stray from the designated flight corridor to which these assurances of safety specifically applied. I wish to state as clearly and as forcefully as I am able, Mr. Speaker, the conviction of the Canadian Government that absolutely no circumstances should ever justify the firing upon personnel of the International Control Commission by any of the belligerents. Even if these helicopters had strayed off course, which all the evidence available to us denies, the penalty for losing one's way in the cause of peace should not be death at the hands of one of the signatories to the Paris Peace Agreement.

While we were under no illusions at the start of our participation in the ICCS concerning the dangers that existed for Canadian personnel in Viet-Nam, we have advocated and, we believed, had secured adequate safety and security measures in the field, based largely on trust in the assurances the ICCS is given by the parties involved in each particular case. However, the circumstances of this incident and the events which followed, particularly the hindrances encountered by the Commission in its efforts to locate and bring aid to ICCS personnel on the missing aircraft, are such that they jeopardize this trust even to the point of questioning the ability of the PRG representative in Saigon to speak for all of the military formations occupying the area in question. It cannot but have an effect on the future operations of the ICCS

in the deployment of its teams and its investigatory capacities, and as a result, on the attitude of the Canadian Government toward continued participation on the Commission.

The International Commission is still attempting to carry out a detailed investigation of the incident, and until it is completed, not all details will be known. In the meantime, however, Mr. Speaker, I wish to provide the House with the following information, as we have it to date, on events leading up to Saturday's tragedy, what we know of the incident itself, and what has passed since.

Under Article 4(d) of the Protocol on international supervision, attached to the 1973 Paris Agreement, Lao Bao is a specifically designated team site of the ICCS. According to the Agreement, the Lao Bao team was to have been in place and operational within at least 30 days after the Agreement was signed. However, for a variety of reasons, it was not until March 17 that the first helicopter reconnaissance visit took place to Lao Bao, via Quang Tri and Gio Linh. For this visit the necessary assurances of safety were received from the Vietnamese Parties involved and the Viet Cong provided liaison officials to accompany the ICCS team. A second reconnaissance visit was planned for April 5, to see if the Lao Bao facilities were ready for ICCS occupation, but it was abandoned when the Viet Cong liaison personnel were prevented by officials of the Republic of Viet-Nam at Quang Tri from boarding the helicopter.

This reconnaissance flight was re-scheduled for April 7; on the morning of April 7, at Quang Tri, with clearances and safety guarantees for the flight received from both the South Vietnamese and Viet Cong authorities, the crew of ICCS helicopters numbers 006 and 115 were carefully briefed by Captain Parent on the exact routing designated by the Viet Cong as being safe for travel to Lao Bao. The two helicopters left Quang Tri at nine o'clock in the morning on April 7 for Gio Linh, where two Viet Cong liaison personnel boarded helicopter 006 and a third boarded helicopter 115. The helicopters departed at eleven-fifteen and proceeded along the route designated by the Viet Cong, from Gio Linh to Dong Ha, and from Dong Ha toward Lao Bao following Highway 9 at a pre-arranged altitude of one thousand meters within the corridor two kilometers either side of Highway 9. At ten minutes before noon, helicopter 115 reported that it was in its final approach to Lao Bao. Approximately three minutes later the ICCS team in Quang Tri received a transmission from the helicopters to the effect that one was receiving ground fire and that the other helicopter had been hit by a missile and was going down. Canadian personnel aboard the surviving helicopter confirm that their helicopter was fired upon at this time. They report that it took evasive action and landed in a hamlet on Highway 9, from where they walked to the crash site of the other helicopter, about two kilometers away. There is therefore no reason to believe that either helicopter was outside the flight corridor at the time of the incident, and the weather conditions were excellent. The helicopter which landed safely was fired upon with small-arms after it was on the ground, where its ICCS markings could not have been mistaken.

The PRG authorities in Quang Tri have issued their own account of what they call "the accident". They claim that the two helicopters were at least 25 kilometers, that is about 15 miles, away from the approved flight corridor when helicopter number 006 was shot down. The statement maintains that they had been this far off-course for 40 minutes.

Within minutes the Commission's regional headquarters at Hue were informed of the radio distress report and were told that there had been subsequent loss of contact. Immediately, Canadian and other ICCS personnel began common efforts in Quang Tri and in Saigon to get information on what had happened, and most important, to launch a search and rescue mission.

All efforts were to no avail. At Quang Tri, about forty miles away, Colonel McLeod, commander of Canadian forces in ICCS region one, contacted representatives of the Viet Cong, which claims to be the party in control of the area of the incident, who were across the river from Quang Tri. During the course of the afternoon of April 7, he was three times refused permission to proceed by either land or air to Lao Bao. He was eventually informed early in the evening of April 7 that necessary arrangements for safe passage to Lao Bao could not be made. Later he was told that one helicopter had landed safely, but that the other had, and I quote, met with an accident unquote. The PRG or Viet Cong representative would give no information on casualties or on the condition of the personnel involved. In Saigon, while General McAlpine and his three colleagues on the Military Committee of the ICCS left for Hue to conduct the inquiry personally, similar attempts were being made to secure information from the PRG or Viet Cong Delegation to the Two-Party Joint Military Commission. These efforts, which involved a three-hour meeting between the PRG representatives and the Indonesian Chairman acting on behalf of the Commission, also failed. The Viet Cong would not permit a proffered American search-and-rescue operation to proceed from Thailand as the Commission had requested, and they refused to provide liaison officers for any search organized by the ICCS, although helicopters were standing by. Nor would they give any information on the personnel involved. Almost twenty-four hours after the incident, the best that could be obtained from the Viet Cong was a letter to the Commission confirming that one helicopter had quote met with an accident unquote, and that the PRG was organizing its own search and rescue operation.

By this time General McAlpine had proceeded from Hue to Quang Tri with other members of the ICCS Military Committee where, on the morning of April 8, he met with the same PRG representative who had refused Colonel McLeod permission the day before to go to Lao Bao. The Viet Cong representative reported, at last, that all those aboard one helicopter had been killed in the quote accident unquote, but he still either could not or would not say which helicopter was involved. General McAlpine was also told that the Viet Cong were bringing out the dead and survivors to Gio Linh that evening, and that he and his colleagues should proceed there to receive them. Early in the morning of April 9, which was yesterday afternoon by our time, General McAlpine received the Canadian survivors and we were able to positively identify, for the first time, which helicopter had been shot down. As I mentioned above, the survivors were examined medically and found to be in good condition.

We have been informed by the Canadian representative on the Military Committee of the ICCS, Major General McAlpine, that when the so-called PRG officially handed over the bodies and survivors on the morning of April 9 at Gio Linh, it made an attempt to have the ICCS Military Committee sign a

prepared statement claiming that the helicopters were off course and that the incident was an accident. The ICCS Military Committee quite rightly refused to meet such an outrageous demand.

From the reports which we have received, however, it is understood that before they were released, the surviving passengers and crew of the helicopter had been required to sign statements prepared by the PRG that they were off course, and that it was implied that if they refused they might not be returned to ICCS authorities. I understand that the survivors did sign the statements; I am sure that Honourable Members will make no mistake about the value of such statements signed under these circumstances.

In the meantime, the Commission is proceeding on an investigation of this tragic incident. The PRG have agreed that the Military Committee will be escorted to the crash area where they will be permitted to conduct their own on-site enquiry.

Mr. Speaker, that is the extent of the information which is available to us now. I am bound to say that this incident is only the most tragic of a number of cases in which ICCS aircraft, all of which are clearly and prominently marked, have been fired upon. As Honourable Members will recall, the first such incidents occurred in late February. Since the incident of which I have just given an account, I have received a report that another ICCS helicopter has been fired upon within the past 24 hours. Two Canadians were among its passengers. On April 9, in the southernmost of the ICC's seven regions, the ICCS helicopter was accompanying a helicopter of the Joint Military Commission near a team-site called Vi Thanh. The JMC helicopter was flying at an altitude of 500 feet, and the ICCS helicopter was following it at an altitude of 300 feet. Both were fired upon from the ground, and the JMC helicopter is reported to have been hit by a number of rounds. As a result, all ICCS helicopters in the region have been grounded pending consideration of the matter by the ICCS at its headquarters in Saigon.

I wish to assure all Canadians, and especially the families and friends of Canadians serving in Viet-Nam, that the Government is taking these incidents very seriously indeed. It is doing everything within its power to ensure that they do not recur. We are in touch with our representatives in Saigon to ensure that all possible measures are taken to that end. When we are satisfied that we have obtained all the relevant information, and after consultation with our partners in the ICCS, particularly those whose nationals have lost their lives, we will take appropriate action to hold accountable those responsible.

Such serious incidents will of course have a bearing upon the Government's decision concerning Canada's continued participation in the ICCS. Honourable Members will recall that in my statement to the House late last month, I said that the general situation in Viet-Nam was highly unsatisfactory, and that Canada would terminate its participation at the end of June if the situation did not improve substantially. Since then, the general situation has not improved; in fact it has deteriorated. If it does not improve very substantially, it will be clear that by continuing to serve in the ICCS, we would be staying on to observe, not a peace, not a cease-fire but a continuing war. We would be doing so, as this recent deplorable incident makes clear, at totally unjustified human risk. This we will not do. This House may be sure, and all Canadians may be sure, that we will not continue to risk Canadian lives in fulfilment of a task which is not worth doing. The Parties are responsible for making the task worthwhile, by making it a task in support of peace in Viet-Nam. We will expect them to fulfil that responsibility.