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Text of a speech by the Honourable Paul Martin,
Secretary of State for External Affairs, in the
House of Commons on May 23, 1967.

When, a year ago last January, the Secretary-General and I discussed the question of Vietnam, I was persuaded by his argument that the settlement of this problem must be within the framework of the Geneva Conference. Regrettable as it was, the United Nations, the Security Council or the General Assembly, could not be expected to deal effectively with this problem because of the absence from its membership of particular countries involved. From that moment on we sought, as I have reminded the House time and time again, to impress upon India and Poland the desirability of constituting the three members on the Commission into a body that might have as its prime purpose the narrowing of the gap between the parties, based on the fact that this instrument has a readier access to Hanoi and to Saigon than any other instrument. We have not been able to persuade all the members of the Commission of the importance of this proposition, although both Poland and India have recognized the potential role for the Commission in this situation.

We did not limit our efforts only to our role as members of the Commission, but on two occasions we sent Mr. Chester Ronning as a special emissary of the Government of Canada to Hanoi, to Saigon and to Washington for the purpose of seeing whether or not he, in the name of the Government of Canada, could make any progress in delineating the distance between the parties and seeing whether or not a formula could be reached which might at least bring about preliminary discussions between the parties involved in this war....

I stated that this Government was concerned about the course of events in Vietnam. For 20 years now, since the end of the Second World War, the world community has tried to build a system of international law and order. It is part of that system to settle disputes by peaceful means. We regret that in Vietnam recourse has been had to military means to deal with what is essentially a political problem. We are naturally concerned about the tragic toll in human suffering and destruction which this conflict is bringing to the Vietnamese people and to their country. We are also concerned that the longer the conflict continues the more difficult it will be to overcome suspicion and distrust on both sides. The longer the conflict continues the greater, of course, are the risks that it may expand, by inadvertence or deliberation, into something more serious. Accordingly, we have urged restraint in those areas and in the way which we thought was the most effective.

I spoke a moment ago of Mr. Chester Ronning, and of the Commissioner's frequent visits to Hanoi.... If Hanoi has repeatedly observed that there is a Hanoi-Canada channel, it is only because Hanoi believes that Canada does have some influence in Washington. What other reason could there be for the way in which our emissaries have been received? What other reason could there be for the nature of the discussions that they have had?

I am not indicating to this House (and I hope that Hanoi will not suggest that I am) what these discussions have been. I have respected fully the confidence of the Government of that country to our emissaries, including Mr. Ronning. As I have said, if we do have a credibility in Hanoi it is because it is thought that as a friend of the United States we rightfully enjoy the confidence of the United States.... Should we retain any credibility in Washington... if we were to engage in consultations with the United States and at the same time follow courses of action that would inevitably destroy our right to their credibility and their confidence?...

So... we intend to carry out our responsibilities to the Commission, and we believe that this is the right course for us to follow. We note with satisfaction that this is the view of India and also of Poland. The Canadian Government has directed its efforts toward finding a basis on which the parties to the Vietnam conflict might be brought into direct contact. I have indicated some of the steps that we have taken in our endeavours in that regard.

The Canadian Government has held that a solution to the problem in Vietnam must be sought by political means. That is part of Canadian policy. We have made it clear that we look to negotiations to settle this problem. It seems important to us that any settlement of the present conflict should be such as to hold out a reasonable prospect of long-term stability in that area. This is because we think that the problem in Vietnam cannot be isolated from the security and stability of Southeast Asia as a whole. We regard the basis of the Vietnam problem as a political one.

As we see it... what is primarily at issue between the parties is the future political arrangements in South Vietnam. It is argued on both sides that the guiding principle should be the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own destiny. It seems to us that the best way of achieving this is to afford the people of South Vietnam an opportunity to determine, by the test of the free ballot, under what institutions and under what government they wish their affairs to be conducted. We believe that the best way in which the Canadian Government can bring its influence to bear on the Vietnam situation is by doing exactly what we have done....

On April 11, in the External Affairs Committee, I outlined four suggestions or ideas that are in keeping with the Geneva Accords; I suggested procedures for a cease-fire arrangement. I said at the time that I did not believe the climate was right for their acceptance; the reaction in Hanoi has been negative. Hanoi takes the position that there can be no parity of position between the parties, and that first of all there must be an acknowledgment that the United States, as Hanoi puts it, is the aggressor, and this notwithstanding the findings of the Commission in 1962.

While the United States would probably find most of our points acceptable, I believe it would register objection to an approach to de-escalation which begins with mutual disengagement in the Demilitarized Zone coupled with a cessation of the bombing. I think that would be unacceptable to them.... The point I make is that, not only should there be a mutual disengagement in the Demilitarized Zone but that, in all equity, if both sides accept that arrangement, there ought to be a cessation of bombing. Mr. Rusk has not explicitly accepted that.

The Canadian Government is prepared to make its own contribution to the eventual settlement in Vietnam. We envisage that any agreed settlement of the present conflict will make provision for some sort of international presence. That, indeed, will be a very difficult assignment and, if and when it comes, as the former Prime Minister of Britain has put it, it may need to be buttressed by the guarantees of the great powers....

S/C