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STATEMENT DISCOURS

STATEMENT BY
THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
THE HONOURABLE ALLAN J. MACEachEN,

"THE TEMPORARY WITHDRAWAL OF
CANADIAN EMBASSY PERSONNEL
FROM SAIGON, APRIL 24, 1975" 13

1. INTRODUCTION

Since there has been recently some criticism by the media of the temporary withdrawal of the personnel of our Embassy in Saigon, a general account of the situation which led to this decision is appropriate. The Canadian public should be aware that, by the time the decision was taken, on April 24, the situation in South Viet-Nam had deteriorated very seriously. Our Embassy, like that of most countries accredited in Saigon, could no longer function effectively: indeed, most of its normal functions could not be fulfilled at all. The CIDA programme, for example, had ceased. Our Chargé d'Affaires and his staff were prepared to remain, but the Canadian Government judged that no useful purpose would any longer be served by their doing so.

2. FUNCTIONS OF THE MISSION

The mission had three main functions to perform in those tragic and confused final days. One was the evacuation of Canadians and of their dependents if they wished to leave; the second was the protection of Canadians remaining in Viet-Nam; the third was assisting the departure of Vietnamese citizens with Canadian connections. The first of those functions could in fact be discharged, and the Canadian Embassy did evacuate from Viet-Nam all the Canadians and their Vietnamese dependents who wished or could be persuaded to leave. Those who remained did so for personal reasons which we must respect; but they received several warnings about the closing of the mission and were given an opportunity to leave on any one of the five flights organized with the cooperation of the Department of National Defence using Canadian Hercules aircraft. The other two functions, however, had by the 24th of April become largely theoretical and could not be fulfilled. It was clear, for example, that the Embassy had exhausted all possibilities of effective assistance to Vietnamese citizens with Canadian connections who wished to leave.

We were dealing with Vietnamese authorities who were determined as a matter of policy to prevent the departure of their own citizens on any scale. Our Chargé d'Affaires pressed long and hard (ultimately with success) to have that policy waived in respect of the Vietnamese dependents of Canadian citizens. But it had become clear that there was no hope of

having the policy waived generally for Vietnamese citizens who wished to leave. Events after our departure have borne out that judgment, and it is worth noting that Embassies which remained after our departure had no more success than we did in having the policy changed. It must also be stressed that until the last minute, the Vietnamese authorities remained able to prevent departures which they had not authorized. Indeed, on the day our Chargé d'Affaires left, the authorities did in fact prevent the departure of persons who were in his automobile and whom he was trying to bring with him.

3. AMERICAN OPERATIONS

There was only one real exception to this general situation. It is that the USA Embassy, especially on the last day of its evacuation, brought out large numbers of Vietnamese who, as far as we know, were not authorized to leave. The Americans could do so for reasons which are unique to themselves; they are certainly circumstances which did not apply to Canada. Rightly or wrongly, the USA had been present and active in Viet-Nam for years, as a major military power engaged in major military operations. Canada never shared their involvement, never had the physical means and resources which went with it, and never had the status which the USA enjoyed and which conferred upon it the ability to act independently of the South Vietnamese authorities. The Canadian people, over the years, did not wish that Canada share the military involvement and status of the USA in Viet-Nam; we did not therefore share the power of independent action which went with that involvement.

What the USA could do in South Viet-Nam, at the very end, Canada could not do. But there is more: what the USA may have needed to do, Canada did not automatically need to do. For example, it could be thought that Vietnamese who had been closely involved with the Americans were in danger from the new South Vietnamese régime, and had to be evacuated for that reason. The same is not true of Vietnamese who were associated with Canadians. There are, for instance, no valid grounds to assume that having worked for Canada or for Canadians in South Viet-Nam places Vietnamese citizens in jeopardy. There was, therefore, not the same need to assure their evacuation from their own country.

We should, I suggest, beware of subjective spill-over, into Canadian perceptions, of concepts or responsibilities that are specifically American. To say that we have humanitarian reasons to take into Canada some of the Vietnamese refugees, including those evacuated by the USA, is one thing; to suggest that in the last days of American presence in South Viet-Nam we had the need, the ability or the responsibility to do what the USA did is, I suggest, quite another matter; and it seems to me quite obviously wrong. I wonder whether much of the criticism we have seen and heard recently does not come from the failure of some to draw a clear distinction between the American and Canadian positions.

4. DECISION TO LEAVE

As it was, when the decision was made to withdraw Canadian Embassy personnel from Saigon on April 24, the Canadian Government faced a choice. We could have simply stayed. The experience of those who did so suggests that we would have served no practical or useful purpose by doing so. Alternatively, we could have, as some did, stayed until the American evacuation a few days later. We would then have risked being caught up in a hazardous and unsatisfactory evacuation from a Canadian standpoint, under the direct protection of the armed forces of the USA, with all that would imply, or we could have been left behind by default rather than by choice (as some foreign missions were) in circumstances which could have left our Mission hostage to the unknown policies of the new authorities. What I mean by that is that we considered that the continued presence of our Embassy could have serious consequences, since our decision to accept refugees in Canada corresponded to the humanitarian instincts of Canadians but appeared to conflict with the desires of the new authorities in South Viet-Nam. Our final choice was to withdraw our Mission in an orderly way, using Canadian means, taking with us those Canadians and their Vietnamese dependents who wished to leave, and those Vietnamese citizens who could be gotten out under the constraints of the situation, of our resources and of our responsibilities. That is what we did. Other countries, including Australia, Britain, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and West Germany, took the same decision earlier or on the same day. Even with the benefit of hindsight, we would not have done otherwise, and I suggest that events have proved that we did the right thing.

5. CONCLUSION

It was a particularly difficult and trying time for the members of the Canadian Mission in Saigon. I think it must be said that they did their job remarkably well in remarkably difficult circumstances. The officers of the Department of Manpower and Immigration carried out their work with a great sense of responsibility in increasingly unproductive circumstances, until it became clear that their presence no longer served a useful purpose. After their departure from Saigon, the members of the Department of External Affairs continued to do their best to discharge their responsibilities in a situation which continued to deteriorate. They did so under the devoted and competent leadership of our Chargé d'Affaires, Mr. Ernest Hébert, whose performance in the days leading to the evacuation and in the process of evacuation itself deserves praise. I am sorry that it has instead provoked strong and emotional criticism in some quarters. I think it needs to be said here that in my opinion such criticism is unjustified and unfounded. I can only congratulate the members of the Canadian foreign service for the job they did in the difficult circumstances which I have described.