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SECRÉTAIRE
D'ÉTAT AUX
AFFAIRES
EXTÉRIEURES.

NOTES FOR A
STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, THE
HONOURABLE MITCHELL SHARP,
HOUSE OF COMMONS, THURSDAY,
FEBRUARY 1, 1973

"VIET-NAM"

Mr. Speaker,

This House has already had an opportunity for a preliminary exchange of views between party spokesmen before the departure from Canada of the first group of observers to the new Commission in Viet-Nam.

Despite the shortness of time, personnel from External Affairs and from our Defence Forces are already in the field. On behalf of the international community, they will observe and report on the implementation of the Agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Viet-Nam.

When the moment of decision came the Parties to the cease-fire had radically compressed the expected time-table. Consequently the Government was faced with the need to decide in time to have the Canadian delegation take off from Montreal on Saturday of last week if we were to comply with the terms of the agreements. Indeed, the Parties asked us to do so on the basis of complex documents, some of which we saw for the first time on Wednesday of last week.

Our participation, I think, was perceived by all sides in this House as necessary. I believe it was seen by the great majority of Canadians as necessary. It was so because all Canadians, and indeed people the world over, so ardently desired that the fighting should stop in Viet-Nam. As I explained to the House on January 24, the day of the Government's decision, Canada had a choice to make that day. On the face of it, it was a dilemma: we could, on one hand, accept membership in the new Commission with whatever reservations we saw fit. This is what the Parties to the agreement were asking us to do. But it would have meant committing Canada to an important step to which there are Canadian preconditions; and it would have meant doing so well before we could possibly know whether those preconditions were met or -- in view of the complexity of the agreements involved -- whether they were even likely to be met. The Government would have regarded that as an abdication of responsibility. I am sure all Honourable Members would have so regarded it. On the other hand, we could have declined to participate in the new Commission. By doing so, we could have stood in the way of ending the fighting in Viet-Nam. No Canadian would have wished his country to do that.

We therefore decided to take part initially, and make available to the new Commission the number of Canadian observers required by the agreements, to meet the time-table set up by the Parties -- in short, during that initial period, do all that we could to discharge the obligations of membership. But we were not prepared to commit Canada to open-ended membership before we were satisfied that Canada's preconditions for membership had been reasonably met. Our participation, which will be for the first sixty days, will enable us to evaluate the arrangements for international observation and reporting and to learn what scope there is for mediation. I must make it clear that Canada's preconditions were not mere gestures of reluctance; they were the product of long and sometimes bitter experience, and they were an effort to point the way toward effective international observation and reporting.

We shall see, in the first sixty days, whether the arrangements can be improved. In particular, we shall see whether a continuing political authority is provided. We shall see whether the contracting Parties are determined to make the agreements work. We shall see how our associates in the new Commission view the responsibilities of our collective role. If we conclude that Canada's conditions are adequately met and that Canada's continued participation would be effective, we may decide to accept full continued membership, with or without reservations. If we conclude that Canada's conditions are inadequately met or that we are likely to be drawn again into an exercise in futility and frustration, as the previous Commission had become,

we shall decide to withdraw. Whichever decision is made will be conveyed to this House. To avoid misunderstanding let me add this: we are not going to tackle those first sixty days of the Commission's existence in a spirit of diffident and passive caution. We are going to make this Commission work, if it can be made to work. Within its properly limited functions we shall try to make it an active and inquisitive commission, and an open, hard-working and co-operative one. Frustration, inactivity and ineffectiveness have been forced upon us in Viet-Nam in the past. If they are forced upon us again, we are determined that it will again be no fault of Canada's.

Members will be aware that the cease-fire machinery includes joint commissions on which the Parties to the cease-fire are represented, as well as the international commission on which Canada is serving. Unless these joint commissions function effectively, the international commission cannot function.

There have been great difficulties in setting up these joint commissions. Many of these difficulties seem to be psychological in nature. Given the history of the conflict, this is no surprise. The time of enforced waiting is however being put to good use by the ICCS. The logistics support and organizational arrangements for the teams and the Headquarters are being improved. So far, co-operation between the members of the ICCS has left nothing to be desired. The moment the joint commissions are functioning effectively, the international commission can begin to deploy its teams and get down to work. The situation in Viet Nam is still serious. I do not want to minimize the real risks that exist. These can only increase if the cease-fire itself, and the supervisory parties, continue to be ineffective.

In trying to make the Commission work, we shall bear in mind that there are things which neither we nor the Commission as a whole are expected to do. In particular, it must be clearly understood that neither the Canadian delegation nor the Commission as a whole are a force to keep the peace. Our task will be to observe and report upon the performance of those whose responsibility it is to keep the peace; it is the Parties to the agreement who bear that responsibility. We may be able to play a good offices role from time to time if the Parties wish to avail themselves of the services of the Commission or of the Canadian delegation for that purpose.

To accomplish the tasks which do form part of the responsibilities of the Commission, we have provided and are continuing to assemble, a body of men and women of the first quality. The delegation is headed by a Foreign Service Officer of distinction and experience, including experience in Indo-China, Ambassador Michel Gauvin. It is composed of personnel of the Department of National Defence and of the Department of External Affairs who have been specially selected for the task. Many of them have previous experience of Indo-China and of international observation roles.

They can be counted upon to do all that anyone could, and the Government will give them maximum support in their task. The Government is mindful of the fact that Canada has been asked by all four Parties to participate, and that Canada and the Canadian delegation are not the nominees, representatives or spokesman of any one Party or of one side in the Viet-Nam struggle. The delegation will conduct itself accordingly. The Government will support them in this.

As I told the House on January 24, the texts embodying the international observer arrangements are complex. We are continuing our careful study and analysis of them, but their full meaning and implication will only become clear in the light of our experience in seeking to apply them. Our publicly stated conditions seem to have influenced those who wrote the agreements. But serious inadequacies remain.

It is important that the House be aware of what we consider to be the principal inadequacies of the international observer arrangements: one is that the agreements by themselves do not provide for a continuing political authority. It may be, of course, that the International Conference envisaged in the agreements will repair that deficiency.

The Government would have preferred the agreement and its supervision to come under the aegis of the United Nations. It is happy to note, however, that the Secretary General of the United Nations will be invited to attend the International Conference.

Another deficiency is the obligation of unanimity in the Commission's decisions and reports. It seems significant that the Parties, wanting an effective Commission, should nonetheless have provided that it must be subject to a rule of unanimity - in other words to a veto. The effects of that rule are alleviated by a qualified provision for reporting by individual members of the Commission if unanimity cannot be achieved; but such reports would have no status as Commission reports.

A further deficiency is that the new commission and each of its teams must act as a single body comprising representatives of all four members. This makes action by one, two, or three national delegations impossible. This could turn out to be virtually an invitation to paralysis. We shall also be testing by experience the qualified provisions for the Commission's freedom of movement.

Another is that the Parties have provided that each of the four Commission countries should pay not only the salaries and allowances of their personnel, but a fixed percentage of the general budget of the Commission as well. This percentage turns out to be small - 2%. The Government is not inclined to make an issue of paying it. But however small, Canada has on several occasions expressed opposition in principle to paying any share of the general budget of the Commission at all.

Then too, we have been concerned that the task of the international observers be realistic and realizable. Yet the agreement provides that the Commission shall supervise and control the entry into South Viet-Nam of military personnel and all military equipment. This seems to specify a task which is clearly beyond the means of an International Commission of this size - or indeed, of any likely size.

Finally, although passing reference is made in the agreement to Cambodia and Laos, no precise arrangements are envisaged for broadening the cease-fire and settlement to these two countries. There seems to be no intention of having them participate in the International Conference. We can only hope that, in the weeks ahead, the effects of a cessation of hostilities in Viet-Nam will be extended to these two countries, so that the fighting will stop throughout Indochina. Indeed, it is disappointing that Asian involvement in the arrangements as a whole is so slight. The omission of Japan and the ASEAN group of countries, except for Indonesia, is particularly conspicuous.

Some of these shortcomings in the arrangement are now built in. Others could be altered at the International Conference. Still others could be corrected or alleviated in their effects if the Parties and our associates in the Commission show enough goodwill and enough determination to make the Commission work and be effective. We shall be watching and working for that.

The comments I have made are not intended as the sort of facile criticism that those who were not involved in hammering out the agreement can always level at those who were. Obviously, this was an extremely difficult negotiation. It is a wonder there was any agreement at all. I am not suggesting that the circumstances could have permitted a better arrangement. What I am trying to do is establish, from the point of view of a conscientious member of the ICCS, the magnitude of the task given to us and the apparent poverty of the arrangements available to carry it out. This is not an effort to establish some sort of fancied position of moral superiority. It is an attempt to explain why we cannot undertake an open-ended commitment: to lay before the House and the Canadian people the sorts of problems that can be foreseen and that led us to warn we might have to withdraw.

We will do what we can to alleviate the effect of these shortcomings by our own efforts, by the manner in which we approach the Commission's operations and our participation in them. I have referred, for example, to the provision for unanimity. We are determined not to be frustrated by it. One way we will do this is by making the Commission and all its activities and proceedings as open and public as possible. We shall consider ourselves free to communicate our views, and the difference between our views and those of other delegations, to whatever person or organization we think fit, or to the public and the press. This applies to the rule of unanimity or any other provision of the cease-fire that might reduce us to inactivity or ineffectiveness.

For sixty days, we are going to put everything to the test: the viability and effectiveness of the international supervisory arrangements themselves, the will and determination of the Parties and of our Commission colleagues to make the agreements and the Commission work, indeed ourselves and our own ability to make the commission work. For sixty days, we shall do all we possibly can to make this Commission work and work effectively. By the end of the sixty days, Canada will form its own judgment of that experience and of prospects for the future. On the basis of that judgment, Canada will reach its own decision on continued participation for a further period. I want to say candidly now that in some important respects, the international observer arrangements are unpromising. I will not prejudice the Government's decision either way. But no one should assume continued Canadian participation will be forthcoming.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hundreds of Canadian men and women, civilian and military, who have served

in the Commissions in the past, to those who are now in Viet-Nam to begin work in the new Commission, and to those who are preparing to go there. They went there and they are now going, not because their country has national interests of its own to pursue there, but because Canada recognizes it has a responsibility to contribute to peace in the world if it can do so effectively. The task is difficult; it can also be a dangerous. Some Canadians have lost their lives trying to accomplish it. Others may yet do so. We bear a heavy responsibility to them to ensure that their dedication and courage serve to contribute effectively to the maintenance of peace. We must do all we can to ensure their role is effective, and we must withdraw them if, despite their best efforts, their role seems doomed to ineffectiveness.

That is the purpose of the Government's policy and of its recent decision. I know that it is also the purpose of all Canadians and of this House which represents them.