



CANADA

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 68/9

VIETNAM

Excerpt from a Statement by the Honourable Paul Martin, Secretary of State for External Affairs, in the House of Commons on March 18, 1968.

...There can be no differences of opinion about the urgency of the need to help bring this terrible ordeal to an end. We believe the only way to do so is through negotiations that are directed toward the establishment of a durable and stable settlement which both sides can accept and live with.

The immediate problem continues to be what it has been for some time; it is as simple to formulate as it has proven difficult to solve in practice. It is the problem of how to get the negotiations started and how to establish a sufficient measure of confidence between the two sides to enable them to sit down together and start discussing the basic political issues at stake in Vietnam, instead of bringing their military weight to bear on them. This is the aspect of the problem to which the Government has directed the highest priority and urgency. It has seemed to us that a country such as Canada, which has had prolonged experience with the problems of that country and which has ready access to both sides, might well be able to help bridge the gap between the battlefield and the conference room.

No third party, of course, can compel the two sides to change their positions and policies in order to take certain actions or refrain from others. The most we can hope to do is encourage the two sides to reconsider their positions, to clarify ambiguities and to see, in this process of discussion and examination, whether any element of common ground exists.

In my view, there have recently been three major developments which have had a bearing on the diplomatic and military impasse which we face at the moment. I refer to the formulation of the position of the United States by the President at San Antonio on September 29 last, to the formulation of the North Vietnamese position by the Foreign Minister of that country on December 29 and, finally, to the activities on the ground in South Vietnam over the past few weeks. Although separated by a matter of months, these events must be looked at together as essential components in the existing problem.

There is no doubt in my mind, and in that of the Government, that the bombing of North Vietnam is a key factor in the total equation for the de-escalation

of the conflict. In the San Antonio statement of last September, the President of the United States announced a new United States approach to the cessation of bombing. He said that the United States would be prepared to stop the bombing if this would lead promptly to productive talks, on the assumption that North Vietnam would not take advantage of this significant measure of restraint on the U.S.A. side to increase its relative military strength in the South. The President's position evidently was formulated to avoid a situation in which, with the bombing stopped and the talks proceeding, the other side would be able to exert renewed and unimpeded military pressure on the ground in the South if the talks did not progress to their liking.

In setting out this approach the President had not abandoned his earlier insistence on the other side making some contribution toward bringing about military de-escalation. He did, however, present it in a flexible way which it was hoped might make it easier for Hanoi to make a gesture toward meeting this requirement without totally abandoning their forces in the South. As I understand the situation, this continues to be the basic position of the United States.

Turning to Hanoi's position, it appeared that some degree of change had taken place there too. In the past, one of the problems has been that Hanoi, for whatever reason, had been unwilling to commit itself publicly to anything more than a demand that the United States stop bombing North Vietnam, and unwilling to give a firm commitment on whether or not this would be a first step toward a negotiated peace. In an interview in January 1967, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister said that talks "could" take place if the bombing stopped. Speaking at a reception at Hanoi in December, almost a year later, he said that talks "will" take place once United States attacks on North Vietnam had stopped.

At the turn of the year, then, it seemed to us that, while the positions of the two sides remained some distance apart, there were signs of change which deserved further attention. Accordingly, I instructed our Commissioner in Vietnam, Mr. O.W. Dier, to proceed to Hanoi to deliver a letter from me on behalf of the Government to the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister, seeking confirmation and clarification of his year-end statement. I also reaffirmed the importance Canada has attached to the International Commission as an agency which could make a useful contribution to the establishment and maintenance of some element of confidence between the two sides while talks were in progress. In issuing these instructions to our Commissioner, I hoped it might be possible to find some way of bridging the remaining gap between the San Antonio formula and the formula outlined by the Foreign Minister for Vietnam in his year-end statement.

The United States had said that the bombing could be stopped in return for an undertaking to talk, plus the exercise of military restraint by the North, while the North had said that talks would follow the cessation of bombing. What I had hoped might be possible was a further modification of positions and agreement by both sides whereby the International Commission might reassert its legitimate presence at key points, such as the Demilitarized Zone, to facilitate the exercise of restraint by both sides in terms of military activities around these key points and areas. If both sides were agreed that a Commission presence of this character would be useful, this could be brought about without any change in the Commission's mandate or without either side openly declaring that it would not do something or that it would do something else. In other words, the Commission by its very presence, rather than by the exercise of force, could exert a restraining influence.

I very much regret having to report to the House that the reply I have received from the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam, together with Mr. Dier's report on their discussions, does not suggest much flexibility in Hanoi's attitude toward factors, other than the cessation of bombing of the North, which clearly have to be taken into account if there is to be any realistic hope that ensuing talks are to have any purpose and meaning.

Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly last September, I urged that the bombing be stopped as a matter of first priority in the search for peace. I saw this, and I urged that it could be considered, not as a sure-fire formula for instant peace but as a deliberate and calculated risk. To break out of the impasse prevailing at that time it seemed to me that the United States might make the first significant move, not as a prelude to capitulation but as a gesture which might encourage the other side to respond in kind, as indeed the North will have to do. It might then be possible for other countries, in the new circumstances which would then prevail, to mobilize pressure for corresponding concessions by the North.

I believe that that was a sensible position to take and one which seemed to me to correspond to the facts as we knew them. I still believe that the bombing will have to be stopped as a matter of first priority, since I think it will be impossible for North Vietnam to appear to be responding to military pressure. All the information we have received from Canadian soundings, and from sources other than our own contacts in Hanoi, only serves to convince me of the validity of this view.

Whether future soundings and exploratory discussions will prove that some form of bargain can be struck I cannot predict. For the moment, the available evidence is clear about the significance to be attached, from the point of view of North Vietnam, to a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam. But if the refusal of North Vietnam to appear to respond more flexibly under continuing military duress is clear, it is no less important to bear in mind the difficulty that would be faced by the United States in modifying its requirements as a direct result of the other side's spectacular military thrusts.

If the United States was not prepared to take the calculated risk we and others urged them to take at the time when the pattern of military activity on the ground was more or less constant, one cannot be too hopeful about fresh initiatives at this particular moment, but the urgent necessity to break through the stalemate on negotiations has not lessened.

There is one potential danger which must be recognized. If talks are entered into with some hope of reaching agreement and are then broken off under the pressure of one side or the other attempting to score a point by a sudden and suicidal military push, it would be all the more difficult to get them started again. A situation such as this could also be an open invitation to further escalation. This would be regrettable.

Despite the clarification which appears to have taken place in respect of the formally-stated positions of the two sides, the immediate prospects for negotiations can scarcely be described as encouraging, though we do not take this as any reason why we should not persist, as other countries are doing, in trying to encourage negotiations which might lead to peace. It is true

that both sides are now firmly committed to a willingness to negotiate, but I am afraid that this does not carry us very far forward, as is tragically apparent by the unbroken continuation of the hostilities.

Both sides seem to envisage rather different objectives for the talks that are to follow a cessation of bombing. For the North, the objective is to bring about the total and early withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam. For the United States, the objective is to secure South Vietnam from Northern military pressure, so that political change can come about peacefully and through the exercise of free choice. Each side is well aware of the other's objectives, which at the moment seem mutually incompatible.

Hanoi seems to see an unreciprocated cessation of the bombing not only as a necessary pre-condition to undertaking talks but as a gesture by the United States symbolizing the beginning of the process of total cessation of all American military action in the South - and, indeed, total withdrawal from the scene.

We know the conditions which were laid down by the United States at the Manila conference with regard to its intention to withdraw after six months, given the existence of certain conditions.

For their part, the United States and South Vietnam have insisted on some measure of military restraint being exercised by the North - once again, not as a final answer to the problem but as representing a North Vietnamese realization that its military objectives cannot be met, and that its objectives cannot be met by military means.

We must maintain the Commission presence in Vietnam. This is first of all our international obligation, and we must be alive to any possible move which will help find a way out of the present impasse. This is our political obligation. The Government accepts these obligations and, as it has done in the past, it will continue to play an active role in any search for peace in Vietnam.

The immediate problem remains what it has been - how to get negotiations started. I reiterate that this is a matter of the greatest urgency and that a cessation of the bombing will clearly have a key significance in moving the problem in that direction. But the intractability of the problem is demonstrated by the fact that the bombing has not been halted, that military restraint is not being shown and that talks have not been entered into. This suggests that future efforts to narrow the gap between the two sides may have to be directed to matters of political substance as well as to the terms and conditions for a beginning of talks. We are urgently examining this aspect of the matter at this particular moment.

I have never believed that stalemate and rigidity are adequate grounds for a "do-nothing" posture and abandoning all efforts because past endeavours have proved unrewarding.