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CANADA AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VIETNAM

A Statement to the House of Commons
on March 5, 1973, by the Secretary
of State for External Affairs, the
Honourable Mitchell Sharp.

...As the House is aware, I have just returned from the International Conference on Vietnam, which I attended as the representative of the Government of Canada. Essentially, this was a conference of the great powers and the belligerents in the Vietnam war. Canada was present because of our participation in the International Commission for Control and Supervision.

As Members will recall, I made clear prior to my departure that we were not going to Paris to sit in judgment on the political and military settlements embodied in the Paris agreement. I have made it clear repeatedly that Canada has not sought, and is not seeking, a truce-supervisory role in Indochina but was prepared to serve in such a capacity if we were convinced that the ICCS could be made to play a useful and effective role in restoring peace in Vietnam.

I have also made clear in this House, and outside it, the conditions we would consider essential if we are to continue our participation in the ICCS. One of these essential conditions was the establishment of an outside political authority independent of the belligerents themselves to which the Commission could send its reports and which could alert the international community to a serious threat to the peace in Vietnam. Provision for such a mechanism was lacking in the January 27 agreement, and it was our hope that this deficiency would be corrected by this Conference. I therefore went to Paris to do all I could to see if a satisfactory authority could be established.

In my initial intervention at the Conference on February 26, I expressed our views on this subject clearly and forcefully and placed before the participants a proposal that provided for the Secretary-General of the United Nations to receive and circulate communications from the International Commission of Control and Supervision to the membership of the International Conference, and to perform a similar function regarding the comments of the membership of the Conference on such communications. The Canadian proposal also contained a provision for the reconvening of the Conference on any of four conditions:

- (a) on receipt of a request from the International Commission of Control and Supervision;
- (b) on receipt of a request from the Four-Party Joint Military Commission or the Two-Party Joint Military Commission;
- (c) on receipt of a formal request from five of the members of the Conference, excluding the Secretary-General of the United Nations; and
- (d) after determining, at the request of any member of the Conference, that a two-thirds majority of the members, excluding the Secretary-General, considered that there was cause to reconvene the Conference.

It soon became clear that few participants at the Conference were prepared to support the type of independent international reporting mechanism, involving the Secretary-General of the United Nations, we had suggested, and some were strongly opposed to the whole conception. It think it is safe to say that it was only because of our insistence on this matter that the Conference addressed itself at all seriously to the matter. What finally emerged in Articles 6 and 7 of the Act (of the International Conference on Vietnam) was the most that could be obtained. Under these arrangements, the reports and views of the International Commission will at least be transmitted outside the closed circuit of the belligerents to the Conference participants, and the Conference itself can be recalled.

I made clear to the Conference our disappointment that it could not agree on a more effective arrangement, and I questioned whether the mechanism established went far enough and whether it could work. I emphasized to the Conference on March 1 that the arrangements provided in Articles 6 and 7 would be carefully reviewed by the Canadian Government in determining the extent to which our conditions for continued participation in the Conference had been fulfilled.

The Act provided an opportunity for world powers to acknowledge their respect and support for the January 27 agreement in association not only with the parties to that agreement but also with the governments participating in the International Commission established under it. It is also noteworthy that the Conference was conducted in the presence of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

I signed the Act on behalf of Canada because the spirit of the Act and the good will reflected in it were such as to command the support of the Canadian people. The Act welcomes peace in Vietnam and it calls for the participants to do nothing to jeopardize that peace. It was, therefore, important to have all the participants at the Conference associated with those objectives, and failure to sign could have been open to misinterpretation. Moreover, not to have signed the Act could only have been construed as meaning that one of our *sine qua non* had not been met. We were not in a position at the Conference, nor are we yet in a position, to say whether the machinery provided in Articles 6 and 7 could serve the purpose we have had in mind. We will look at these arrangements in the light of our experience

in the International Commission. This will be one of the prime factors in determining whether the Commission is playing or can play an effective role in restoring peace to Vietnam.

We must now examine very carefully the political authority and the reporting arrangements that have been established to determine whether, in our judgment, they have a reasonable prospect of operating effectively. We must also relate these arrangements to the effectiveness of the International Commission on the ground. The Canadian delegation, under the direction of Ambassador Gauvin, is making a tremendous effort to see that the Commission works. But we cannot do it alone, and disturbing developments in Vietnam compel us to question whether the International Commission will be allowed to function in a way that would justify our continued participation. Perhaps -- and I cannot say that I am very confident -- the discussions in Paris will result in increased support by all the participants at the Conference for the objectives we have in mind. Over the next few weeks, therefore, we will need to assess the relevant factors very carefully. It may be that at some time I should pay a visit to Vietnam and see the situation on the ground for myself. If so, I would invite members of the Opposition to come with me, but that is a decision that has not yet definitely been made. I will report to Cabinet on the results of this assessment and the Government will then be in a position to make its decision.

Perhaps I should emphasize again that the peace in Vietnam depends upon the parties to the peace agreement itself. The International Commission can help by investigation and observation and reporting but it cannot keep the peace. The Commission is not an essential element. It can be of help only if the parties -- and that means all of them -- wish to see the Commission function.

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