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A VIEW AT CLOSE QUARTERS OF THE PEACEKEEPING PROBLEM IN VIETNAM

A Report to the House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence on March 21, 1973, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp.

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I led a group of Parliamentarians, officials and journalists on a journey of 22,000 miles, Mr. Chairman, between March 13 and 18, in the course of which I had conversations with the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister of Japan, and the Foreign Minister, Prime Minister and President of the Republic of Vietnam. I also met the head of the so-called Provisional Revolutionary Government's delegation to the Joint Military Commission in Saigon. In Laos I spoke with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and high officials of the Pathet Lao movement. In Hanoi, I spoke to the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

In addition to these conversations, I talked with a representative cross-section of the Canadians who are serving with the Canadian delegation in South Vietnam and with our representatives in Laos. Our last representative on the old International Commission for Control and Supervision in Hanoi closed our operation there after close to 19 years and departed with us.

All these talks centred upon the question of continued Canadian participation in the International Commission for Control Supervision in Vietnam, and I may say that the views of those with whom I spoke were either very clearly, or by direct implication, to the effect that Canada should continue to serve on the Commissions and that the consequences of our early departure would be far-reaching. I have also received similar views from the Governments of the United States, Britain and China.

I made no commitment to any of them and can make no commitment now as to what our response will be, since the question is still before the Government. I hope at the meeting of this Committee today that I will hear some other views and I will certainly welcome the views that may be expressed by any of the members of this Committee as to the course of action that we might follow.

It is, I think, relevant to point out, however, that all the views that I heard and that I have received from other governments were not motivated by anything like identical considerations and purposes. Each party had its own particular reasons for wishing to have us stay on, but few, if any, of them had common motives among themselves or shared those of the

Canadian Government. Some, I think, would like to have seen an effective international commission. For others, it was sufficient for their purposes that a commission of some sort should exist. Their reasons were more in the realm of psychology and local considerations than arising out of a conviction that the ICCS as constituted could, in fact, ensure the carrying-out of the terms of the agreement.

For reasons that are easy to understand, governments of countries that are not directly involved in Vietnam present more general but familiar arguments to the effect that any international presence is better than no international presence, and that, even though there is no guarantee the Commission will ever do anything useful, Canada should nevertheless continue to serve against the possibility that it might be able to do something at some future time. This is not our own assessment of the Commission's *raison d'être*, or necessarily the assessment of those who advance the argument, but it illustrates a danger present in taking on assignments such as this. The job tends to create its own justification. For our part, after 19 years experience in Vietnam, we are not greatly impressed by this sort of argument.

The attitude of the leaders in South Vietnam was considerably more direct. They had no illusions that the ICCS would be able to perform in the manner envisaged in the agreement and protocols. Nor did they dispute our suggestion that the Commission was not a vital or integral part of the agreement itself since, if the parties wished to apply the agreement, they could do so without reference to the ICCS and, if they did not wish to honour the agreement, the ICCS could not oblige them to do so. I explained very frankly to the Vietnamese, both in the South and in the North, that the composition of the Commission rendered it virtually impossible for it ever to make a report that would be unfavourable to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or the Provisional Revolutionary Government side, while, because of our desire to be objective, it is quite conceivable that we should find ourselves supporting a report detrimental to the RVN position.

The South Vietnamese leaders recognized this but claimed that, as long as we were present to bring all points of view into the public domain, we were helping their cause. They also laid great stress on what they called the political settlement. They said that they were concentrating their best efforts on the conversations now taking place in Paris with the PRG to set up the joint National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, which is provided for under the peace agreement, which is, in turn, to make preparations for the holding of an election which would determine the political future of South Vietnam. I was told by President Thieu that it was in this area that he would seek his ultimate solution. If this failed, it would not be for want of trying on his part.

In my conversations with Foreign Minister Lam and President Thieu, I raised the question of civilian prisoners in South Vietnam. I urged them to consider the weight of public opinion in Canada and abroad on this matter. Both told me that they had already released 5,000 civilian prisoners on the occasion of the recent Lunar New Year celebrations and that they had provided a list of over 5,000 additional civilian prisoners to the other South Vietnamese party for release in accordance with the Paris agreement and

protocols. Both the Foreign Minister and the President went on to contrast their record on this issue with that of the other South Vietnamese party. They told me that, of the large number of South Vietnamese civilians captured by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, only 200 or so had been included in the list required under the Paris agreement and protocols.

In Laos, I had a long conversation with Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. He was naturally enough most concerned about what was happening in and to his own country. While he recognized that there was a direct and close relationship between the war in Vietnam and the use of Laotian territory for military purposes, his particular concern was to ensure a degree of international involvement in the future of Laos through the reactivation of the old tripartite ICC in Laos. The two sides in the war in Laos have not yet agreed on the military terms by which the agreement will be implemented. It is this protocol to the agreement which will determine the role of the commission. Until the protocol has been agreed upon, it will not be possible for the Government to determine how it will respond to the request that Canada should take part in a reactivated ICC in Laos.

I should like at this point to report to the Committee...that I raised the question of Mr. Lloyd Oppel with the Pathet Lao leadership in Laos, where Mr. Oppel was taken prisoner, and again in Hanoi.

General Phoun Sipraseuth, in Vientiane, at first told me that Mr. Oppel's release was being delayed pending certain political developments in the situation in Laos. I minced no words in making it clear to him that there could be no possible relationship between continued imprisonment of a non-combatant Canadian citizen and any political developments in that country. I said that Canadian public opinion was very much interested in the fate of Mr. Oppel and that it would react against the Pathet Lao for keeping him imprisoned for reasons such as those he had mentioned. He promised to report my position to his superiors.

In Hanoi, I again enquired after Mr. Oppel -- and I did so because his name was included on a list of prisoners supplied by the DRVN, and that was why I felt justified in raising the question with the authorities there -- and was informed that the DRVN authorities would be in touch with their Pathet Lao allies to see what could be done. I am hopeful that these representations will have the effect of reducing the inexcusable delay in releasing Mr. Oppel.

I also raised the question of the three Canadians who were passengers aboard an ICC aircraft which disappeared on a flight between Vientiane and Hanoi in 1965. On that matter my enquiry was noted, but it elicited no new information.

In Hanoi the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam replied to all questions by reference to the terms of the agreement. This they regard as sacrosanct and, like the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister and Prime Minister asserted that they intended to abide strictly by the agreement and expected everyone else to do the same. In this context, the Prime Minister asserted that there was no conflict between North

Vietnamese desire to unify the country and his insistence on his country's desire for peace. The strict observance of the agreement would lead to the peaceful unification of North and South Vietnam.

In summary, I would say that both North and South Vietnam expect to get quite different, and perhaps contradictory, results from the strict observance of the agreement. In Laos the earnest desire of the people with whom I spoke was that they should be left alone to settle their own differences. It seemed such a reasonable and modest request that one could not help being attracted to it and to the people who made it.

One of the high points of the trip was the time spent with the Canadian delegation in South Vietnam. I would like once again to say how good it was to see Canadians working in this extremely difficult environment against so many odds and maintaining such a high level of morale and effectiveness. The vast majority of personnel in the Canadian delegation are, of course, from the Canadian Forces, ably directed by Major-General Duncan McAlpine under Ambassador Gauvin, the head of our delegation. They and their External Affairs colleagues have demonstrated their technical and professional competence many times over. It became abundantly clear that, had it not been for these Canadians, it is very doubtful if the ICCS, and, indeed, in some respects, other bodies established by the agreement, would have functioned even to the extent that they do.

Some of the members of the Committee may have seen reports of the reception given by the head of the Canadian delegation, Michel Gauvin, on the evening of our arrival, which, I believe, was the first time that all parties to the agreement and all the members of the ICCS had come together under one roof. Along with my Parliamentary colleagues, I had the opportunity of exchanging views with many of them and to broaden my understanding of the widely different points of view they represented. I think it must have been particularly helpful to the press, who, I gather, monopolized most of the time of the PRG delegation.

We were, of course, given a thorough briefing by the Canadian delegation and later visited a regional headquarters at Can Tho.... Saigon is there and Can Tho is down in the middle of the Delta. This place, as I say, is in the much-fought-over Mekong Delta, where once again we were shown in intimate and close detail just what was involved in the ICCS operation and how the parties were conducting themselves on the scene of action. We were told by our briefers that it had been estimated that there had been some 7,000 incidents since the cease-fire came into effect in January, some of these involving extremely large-scale operations, possibly up to divisional strength. Out of these have emerged only some 31 requests for investigation by the ICCS -- some of these have been added since I left Saigon. There were only 26 when I was there, so five have been added in the few days since. From these requests, just two Commission reports have emerged. Moreover, there are areas in which the essential pieces in the mechanism, the four-party and two-party Joint Military Commissions, have yet to be established.

While there is no denying the seriousness of the situation, I would not like to leave the impression that nothing has been achieved or that our presence has been of little or no value. No one will deny that the present situation, however unsatisfactory or short of the condition of peace which everyone hopes for in Vietnam, is nevertheless an enormous improvement over the situation that existed before the peace agreement was signed on January 28. To begin with, American and Vietnamese prisoners of war are being released. Shortly, the last United States forces in Vietnam will have departed. The ICCS has had its role to play in these developments and, if it did nothing else, this would have justified its existence. In addition, the four parties are in contact, and perhaps more important, so are the two South Vietnamese parties, not only in Saigon and other areas but, more importantly, at the political level in Paris.

The agreement as it has been carried out falls short of what we desired, although I am not at this stage prepared to say by how much or how this short-fall will affect further Canadian participation. The facts as I have given them to you are now being studied by my colleagues and me and we will very shortly be bringing our decision to Parliament for consideration. I hope that by now no one in this country or elsewhere is under the impression that it is our function to bring peace to Vietnam. Many have tried, but it is now clear beyond doubt that only the Vietnamese themselves can establish peace in their troubled country.

I should also mention that, in all three countries that I visited, I informed the government leaders I met of Canada's willingness to provide economic development assistance and that we would be prepared to discuss the modalities, including the question of bilateral and multilateral assistance, at any time they considered convenient. In all three capitals, my interlocutors agreed to pursue this matter with us at a mutually convenient time.

I would not like to conclude this summary of my tour without mentioning the kindness and hospitality with which we were met by the governments in Saigon, in Laos and in Hanoi. The warmth of the welcome made it clear that, whatever our position in respect of the role of the ICCS might be, in bilateral terms, Canada is well regarded by the statesmen with whom I spoke. Thank you.

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