MALCOLM FRASER: AUGUST 2nd, 1966
MINISTER FOR THE ARMY:

GENERAL:

There are encouraging signs of improvement in the troubled areas of South-East Asia, even though in Viet Nam there is no easy or quick solution to the war now raging in that country. Hard work, courage and patience is required of the free world to achieve lasting peace.

Discussions with South-East Asian Government leaders, and my own observations during a comprehensive visit to countries in the area, lead me to feel cautiously optimistic about the future security of these countries. There are marked signs of improvement, particularly in Viet Nam, where allied forces are now taking the fight to the enemy in a manner that was not possible last year.

Thailand is working to overcome its own insurgency problems both in the north-east and south, near the Thai-Malaysian border. While the difficulties should not be underestimated their leaders believe that this is a problem that they can handle themselves.

There are now possibilities of a peaceful end to the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Laos is a country which is little understood in Australia and little known. There is a view amongst many people, perhaps, that this is a country that was written off several years ago as a result of communist activity. This is very far from the truth. I was greatly impressed with the resolution and courage that is being shown by the present Laotian Government. The political and military situations both seem very much better than they have been for a very long time.
Quite often in the Australian press I have read stories of Pathet Lao or Viet Minh offensives which leave the reader with the impression that it is a one-sided affair. This is not correct. Laotian Government forces have been quick to engage the enemy and push them back time and again.

I was told that today it was possible to go with complete security in any of the areas which were said to be under Government control and that the Laotian Government has, at the same time, started to do some really useful work in the villages, improving the standards and the services in the remote areas of the country.

The main North Vietnamese interest in Laos now seems to be in the series of supply routes that make up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Viet Nam.

The communist Pathet Lao forces operating in areas adjacent to these supply routes receive considerable assistance from North Vietnamese troops deployed to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Elsewhere in Laos the Viet Minh appear to offer only sporadic support to the Pathet Lao.

VIETNAM

The improved military situation in South Viet Nam is due mainly to the build-up of Free World Forces. The United States, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand now have forces in Viet Nam and additional forces are coming from Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. Allied strength, including the armed forces of the Republic of Viet Nam, which are still carrying the main burden of the fighting, is now taking the fight to the enemy. The Viet Cong has not demonstrated any major military initiative so far this year, despite heavy and continued infiltration from North Viet Nam.
The Government of the Republic of Viet Nam is more impressive than it was two years ago, during my last visit. Prospects for achieving political stability have improved and preparations are going ahead for elections in September for a Constitutional Assembly.

Improved conditions for the South Vietnamese will involve combined military and civic action. Military action to clear areas of Viet Cong must come first. It is no use building a school if it is likely to be burnt down a week later. Many well known people have said that there should be increased economic and social support for South Viet Nam. This is true but such support would be wasted unless there is military security. Areas have first to be secured before progress is possible.

CIVIC ACTION:

Civic action in Viet Nam is an important aspect of the struggle in that country to assist the people to improve their social and economic conditions.

The Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy Province will expand its civic action program as reasonable security is established over the Task Force area of responsibility. Such tasks by the Australian Army are only a small part of the overall civic aid given to South Viet Nam by the Australian Government under the Colombo Plan and South-East Asia Treaty Organization arrangements, for which funds are provided by the Australian Government.

The Task Force is achieving excellent co-operation with Vietnamese officials in their area. These villagers have been harassed and taxed by the Viet Cong for many years and are short of essential goods. Salt and rice captured by the Australians in the Phuoc Tuy Province is already being re-distributed to the villagers in a manner which prevents it getting back into Viet Cong hands.
In the Phuoc Tuy Province, the main target for civic action is a major village which has had no medical supplies or a doctor for more than 15 years. The first project commenced was a modest dispensary building which must be equipped with simple type toilet facilities and ample clean water. The next project is a central market place designed in the local style and a later proposed project is a new school.

In Vung Tau, many minor projects such as a dispensary building and a scheme to provide permanent water to a poor part of the town are being carried out. The wages of a local midwife are also paid to enable her to operate with occasional assistance from an Australian Army Medical Unit.

Wherever possible, the materials for these projects are bought from various local merchants in small quantities. They are paid for by funds allotted to the Australian Force Commander by an Australian Government grant.

Local labour, materials and assistance are used wherever possible in an effort to increase local employment and to get resources circulating in the area.

When free from operations and safe to work, doctors and dentists have carried out regular treatment for villagers.

Thousands of South Vietnamese civilians who have been dispossessed not only of their villages and homes, but of all their personal possessions by Viet Cong, are forced to re-establish themselves in new areas. Many have moved near to the Task Force area but have absolutely no possessions.

It is in this field that all Australians could play an important part and I hope the opportunity to contribute surplus household commodities, such as pots and pans, cloth pieces for making up into clothing (particularly children's), soap, crockery, needles, scissors and thread will be welcomed. There is a special requirement for non-electric sewing machines and simple hand tools such as hammers, screwdrivers and gardening tools.
The Army has been delighted at the response by the Returned Servicemen's League which has offered to collect contributions of this kind.

Another important project in which the Australians are involved is the Vietnamese Junior Military Academy where about 1500 young men and boys are receiving academic training. The Academy has been running down over the past few years and badly needs assistance to improve the facilities for the education of these young men.

As Australians are settling down to their task in South Vietnam and with the build-up of Task Force strength a number of amenities for the troops themselves have been introduced. In the near future, a detachment of the Australian Services' Canteens Organization will be sent to Vietnam.

The canteens, which will be operated by the new detachment from Australia, will receive supplies from both Australian and American sources. They will distribute these items to Australian units. Two retail outlets will be established. One in the Task Force area and one in the logistics area.

Australian troops serving in South-East Asia have high morale and are fine ambassadors for their country. Among these troops there are national servicemen who have become an integral and indistinguishable part of the overseas force. They do not like to be thought of as national servicemen, but as members of the units with which they serve. They are serving in Viet Nam and Malaysia and there is a deep respect developing between the regular soldier and the national serviceman. Certainly the Viet Cong have no reason to distinguish between them.
MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, has been engaged on security operations. In Sabah, Royal Australian Engineers are continuing the backbreaking task of building a jungle road in the outback as part of Australia's civil aid program.

The people of Sarawak and Sabah welcome the support given them and all have praise for the task being performed by the Australians.

We may have commitments in South-East Asia for a long time. For example, it does not follow that the Australian troops will be withdrawn from Malaysia with the end of confrontation. British forces built up substantially as a result of confrontation but Australian troops (already in Malaysia as part of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve) recorded only minor additions to their strength.

Australian Army Units based in Malaysia as part of the British Commonwealth Strategic Reserve were largely concentrated at Terendak Cantonment - the largest and most modern military base east of the Mediterranean - in Malacca on the West Coast of the Malay Peninsula, with the 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group.

This Group was located in Malaysia under the terms of the Anglo-Malaysia Defence Treaty and committed to the security of the region. It is made up of British, Australian and New Zealand infantry battalions with supporting artillery, engineer, signals and logistic units.

Since confrontation of Malaysia by Indonesia began, units of the 28th Brigade Group have served for periods up to six months on border security duty in the Borneo State of Sarawak - phased in and out of the operational area as part of the normal rotation of Commonwealth units in the area.
Subject to discussions between Governments it is expected that when confrontation ends, those units of the 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade Group will return to base at Malacca to continue their role on the Malay peninsula.

At the moment Australia has about 6,500 troops serving in South-East Asia with the bulk comprising the 1st Australian Task Force - about 4,500 - in Viet Nam.

By committing Australian troops to the South-East Asia area we are making our contribution to the general security of the region.

This act not only accords with our international obligations but it also represents the only course which is consistent with long term Australian security.
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