PRESS STATEMENT:

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The problem of Vietnam has broken once more in the news, largely through the imaginative and forthright speech made by President Johnson a short while ago offering negotiation over Vietnam and a massive aid program for South-East Asia.

In his speech the President set down more clearly perhaps than he did before the main lines of American policy and the reasons for that policy. He said the United States would not grow tired of the struggle in South Vietnam and that it would not cease in its efforts to secure independence for that country.

He went on to say that he would be prepared to have unconditional discussions over the South Vietnamese problem, but at the same time he made it quite clear that these discussions would have to lead to an independent South Vietnam that was no longer attacked by North Vietnam and Communist China.

There has been a great deal of misunderstanding about this term "unconditional discussion". Some people have taken it to mean that the Americans would agree to the conditions imposed by the North. This is quite untrue, the North has said that they won't talk until all American forces are withdrawn. In fact, the North has said, as British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Michael Stewart, recalled a short while ago, that they are only prepared to talk with the communist front organizations in South Vietnam, thus under their terms discussion would take place merely between communist groups. The term "unconditional", as used by the President, doesn't mean any such thing. It means the United States is prepared to talk but that other matters would remain as they now are.

There were people here who tried, for no good reason that I can see, to draw some difference between the views of our Government and the United States. The major foreign policy speech that has been made was delivered by Paul Hasluck some time ago, and there is nothing in this that
is not entirely consistent with what the President said, but the critics of our policies, those whom I think would seriously like the United States to withdraw from South-East Asia but are not yet prepared to say so in forthright terms, have tried to prove a difference on the basis of a snap reply given to a question without notice by the Prime Minister. This was the reply in which the Prime Minister denounced a certain kind of negotiation. Let me emphasise this - a certain kind of negotiation. The Prime Minister was referring to the people who had been urging negotiations on the United States, who had been urging that the United States cease to fight and talk even though they knew that the Viet Cong and North Vietnam would go on fighting. This, in fact, isn't a negotiation it would be a surrender. This was the kind of negotiation that the Prime Minister quite rightly rejected.

Two or three weeks ago the President said he would go anywhere at any time to talk about the South-East Asian problem, and all he did in his recent speech was to reaffirm this although he used a different phrase - unconditional discussions - it is the word "unconditional" that has led to the misunderstanding for the reasons I have already outlined. It is also worth noting that the President has more firmly than ever before placed conditions upon the conclusion of such discussions - an independent South Vietnam.

There are some people who have said "what does independence, what does freedom mean to South Vietnam because it is not a democracy?" Certainly it isn't but a distinction needs to be made between a country that wishes to be independent however it may be governed, and the condition in which a country comes to be governed and directed by a foreign power. It may be more appropriate to say that what is being fought for in South Vietnam is the right of that country to go its own way, to choose its own destiny without interference from others. This is what South Vietnam and Communist China are specifically trying to deny South Vietnam.

One of the best speeches that has been made on South Vietnam was delivered by the new British Foreign Secretary in the Labour Government
Mr. Michael Stewart. He drew attention to the fact that in 1959 the Government of North Vietnam called for an intensification of Viet Cong activities in the South full scale guerilla warfare. North Vietnam then promised to help this guerilla movement with weapons, advice and personnel. It wasn't until these events had occurred, the Foreign Secretary continued, that South Vietnam appealed to the United States for military aid. As late as 1961 there were only 700 members of the United States forces in that country. The American build-up came as a consequence of attacks from North Vietnam which resulted in an appeal from the Government of South Vietnam. It is most important for us to remember this.

The Foreign Secretary also made it clear that it was only after there had been a direct attack on United States' vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin that the United States struck at North Vietnam itself. He also goes on to say that if United States' forces are attacked they cannot be criticised for retaliating against the bases from which those attacks come and those bases are in North Vietnam. He pointed out that there were five years - 1959 to 1964 - between the time when the North actively entered this campaign and when the United States first struck at the territory of North Vietnam - five years of patience and extreme moderation in the face of aggression and terror.

Mr. Michael Stewart then condemned the warfare methods of the Viet Cong. He pointed out that in 1963 2,000 unarmed civilians were killed by them, nearly 2,800 in 1964. In the village of Kinh Non he said that a policeman was murdered and his body cut to pieces. At the policeman's funeral the Viet Cong exploded an anti-tank mine, killing one of the mourners and wounding several others. At Pleiku, two bus-loads of people, all of them civilians, including women and children, were murdered by the Viet Cong. He pointed out that the communist campaign in this country is a campaign of terror. Terror against the ordinary civilians, including women and children. The terror is designed to emphasise that the Saigon Government cannot protect them. If this kind of terror, if this kind of aggression succeeds, the effect on many countries would be profound.
There would be alarm throughout Asia and Africa and South America. The Foreign Secretary emphasised this and drew attention to the tragic consequence of United States withdrawal.

While there must be determination to resist this doesn't mean that there should not be continuing efforts to find some kind of peaceful solution that is a guarantee to South Vietnam. However, I am entirely sceptical of North Vietnamese and China's willingness to negotiate in any realistic manner. We have seen them refuse President Johnson's bold and magnificent offer, we have seen them refuse to see the special envoy that the British Prime Minister sent out to Asia to explore possible means for a solution. This envoy has been rejected by Communist China and Hanoi. His visit has been described by them as useless.

It is difficult to say where this problem will take us. The United States has indicated its resilience, its willingness to talk, but it has made it quite clear that this willingness does not mean a willingness to surrender. Peking and Hanoi regimes have refused even to talk, have continued to demand conditions that would lead to the defeat of South Vietnam. While this position remains it is difficult to see what meeting ground there can be except on the battlefield.