

Exchanges of this nature are among the varied means by which my Government is widening its consultations with Asian Governments, strengthening existing partnerships and seeking new and better relations with our neighbours.

In the view of my Government, South-East Asia remains the area in which New Zealand can most effectively contribute to efforts to maintain peace and security through collective action. Britain's decision to withdraw its military forces from Malaysia and Singapore by the end of 1971 directly affects these collective arrangements and is creating an entirely new situation for New Zealand. Despite the changed circumstances my Government continues to believe firmly that New Zealand has a national interest in the security of South-East Asia and a genuine national role to play there.

My Government has accordingly announced its decision to maintain naval, army, and air forces at present strengths in Malaysia and Singapore after 1971. The arrangements by which our presence in these countries will in future be based are being discussed with the Governments of Australia, Britain, Malaysia and Singapore.

New Zealand will be represented at senior Ministerial level at a Five-Power Meeting to be held next month to discuss further the implications of the British withdrawal.

Despite the limitation of bombing and the opening of talks designed to bring about a peaceful settlement in Vietnam, communist aggression and subversion have been maintained in the South, fighting has been heavy and the need for allied help has continued. My Government has therefore maintained both its military and civilian assistance to the Republic of Vietnam. It remains convinced, however, that a lasting settlement of the conflict can come only through negotiations undertaken in good faith. It places great importance on the success of the Paris talks and in consultation with its allies will continue to seek a settlement which will bring an end to aggression from the North, maintain freedom of choice in the South and provide for forms of international supervision and guarantee.

My Government has always believed that stability in South-East Asia and elsewhere depends not only on the maintenance of security but also on the development of social and economic conditions offering health and opportunity for the individual. It continues therefore to place special importance on several forms of international assistance under the Colombo Plan and the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan. It will continue to increase its valuable bilateral aid to Asian countries and Commonwealth countries in Africa. It will also give practical support to multilateral aid programmes through its financial contribution to United Nations agencies. In addition it will continue to assist and encourage the excellent work done in the field of aid by private organisations in New Zealand.

My Government has been pleased to play a part in a revival of confidence and co-operation within the Commonwealth. The recent Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers, which my Prime Minister attended, demonstrated that the Commonwealth, now an association of 28 independent nations, is well equipped to assist international understanding and human betterment. Much of New Zealand's most important international activity is performed within a Commonwealth setting and in the year ahead my Government is determined to play a full part in the varied forms of Commonwealth endeavour.