

Extract from Hansard, October 25, 1962:

CUBA - STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER

Right Hon. J.G. Diefenbaker (Prime Minister):

Mr. Speaker:

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I should like to make a short statement in regard to the Cuban situation. I do not intend to recapitulate the events of the last few days, all of which are known to hon. members. However, I think I should refer to President Kennedy's statement on Monday night that Russian action in placing missiles and bombers in Cuba threatens this continent and Central and South America. Indeed, the Soviet union by its action has reached out across the Atlantic to challenge the right of free men to live in peace in this hemisphere.

I think Canadians are in general agreement that these offensive weapons, located so contiguously to our continent are a direct and immediate menace to Canada. Furthermore, they are a serious menace to the deterrent strategic strength of the whole western alliance on which our security is founded. The result is that a threat is posed not only to this continent but to the NATO alliance as a whole, and indeed to all the free world, whose security depends to such an extent upon the strategic strength of the United States.

The United States government, as I have said on an earlier occasion, informed us of the facts of the situation and of the course of action proposed to be taken some few hours before President Kennedy made his announcement.

The government commenced immediately to consider the measures that the Canadian government and Canadian forces should take in order to be ready to deal with whatever eventualities would arise from this action. So that the attitude of the government will be clearly understood -- and again I am asking for the support of the house as a whole in this connection -- we intend to support the United States and our other allies in this situation.

It is a serious one. It has been necessary and will always remain necessary to weigh the risks both of action and inaction in such circumstances. I need not refer to the record of Canada in two world wars, in the NATO alliance and in Korea as demonstrating the fact that Canadians stand by their allies and their undertakings, and we intend in the present crisis to do the same. On the other hand, we shall not fail to do everything possible to seek solutions to these problems without war. We shall seek to avoid provocative action. Our purpose will be to do everything to reduce tension.

I think I should summarize some of the principal actions which have been taken by the government to date to deal with the question. The first, which was referred to by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, was to exercise a control over Soviet bloc aircraft bound for Cuba. He has explained these measures to the house in some detail; I would add simply that commencing even before the president's speech we had acted to ensure that Canadian air space and Canadian air transport facilities were not being used to carry arms to the Soviet bases in Cuba.

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Second, all Canadian military forces have taken necessary precautionary measures to improve their readiness to meet any serious developments. The Canadian component of the NORAD forces has been placed upon the same level of readiness as the United States forces under NORAD operational control. Furthermore, as was stated by the Minister of National Defence, we have deferred any further movement of dependants of armed services personnel overseas. We have held up the authorization of any long leave for armed services personnel. The government today approved the measures which the forces would have to take in the event that the present crisis led to a more serious situation. Our civilian departments have been instructed as a matter of urgency to bring up to date the measures which they would need to take in any emergency. They are doing so. The ministers and key civilian officials have been asked to remain available during this period of crisis.

On other occasions I have informed the house of preparations for carrying on government should the worst occur. These preparations cover not only the public service but also provincial governments and municipalities which we have been financing and assisting with information and advice. I do not think I should go any further into detail in dealing with the measures which we have taken or would be prepared to take should circumstances require us to do so.

I wish the house and the Canadian people to know that the government has taken such precautions as are necessary at this stage to co-operate with our allies, and to be prepared for contingencies that might arise. As I said a moment ago, the government is seeking to find means by which the dangerous, threatening situation can be settled without recourse to arms. On the other hand, we recognize the fact that the free world as a whole cannot afford to permit its essential security to be endangered by offensive weapons mounted on bases adjacent to North America. As the Secretary of State for External Affairs said last evening during the course of his interview on the television facilities of the nation, we shall continue to do everything we can to avert the dangers to which we are exposed.

As far as the last twenty four hours are concerned, the main facts are well known to members of the house. Some Soviet ships have altered course away from Cuba. One Soviet tanker, after having been intercepted by a United States naval ship, was allowed to proceed on its way since it had been satisfactorily established that the cargo was petroleum.

I think we may take encouragement from the restraint being exercised at the moment. However, it would be dangerously premature to assume that the critical phase of the current situation has passed. There are two pressing needs to be met, namely not only to avoid conflict but to find a peaceful solution to this new Soviet challenge.

I think members of the house are in agreement that the greatest hope of finding such a solution lies in the United Nations. The acting secretary general is to be commended for the speed with which he has acted to discharge the heavy responsibility he bears as the executive head of the U.N. His proposal for a standstill is designed to gain the time that is so urgently needed while the search goes forward for some formula which will provide an acceptable solution. His offer of his personal good offices is in the best tradition of his predecessors in that office.

Meanwhile the security council is to meet again at four o'clock. There the formal discussions will be resumed. Perhaps by that time the replies of President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev will have been received.

There is a debate going on throughout the world regarding the legality of the quarantine measures which the United States has imposed. To my mind such arguments are largely sterile and irrelevant. We have a situation to face. Legalistic arguments, whatever they may be, cannot erase the fact that the Soviet union has posed a new and immediate threat to the security not only of the United States but of Canada as well.

Chairman Khrushchev's apologists say "What is the difference between Soviet missile bases in Cuba and United States bases on the periphery of the Soviet union?" The United States bases abroad have been installed only in response to the threatening pressures from the Soviet union, and have never been concealed from the public. The west, moreover, has refrained in recent years from any move to upset the world balance. There are countries in all parts of the world in which nuclear weapons could have been installed by the west. A deliberate decision was made not to do so. We in Canada have shown responsibility in this connection in order to avoid the proliferation of these dangerous weapons throughout the world. Sir, to compare the western activities with the provocative, clandestine arming of Cuba is to ignore the calculated restraint which has characterized western policy. In this light the call for the dismantling of these new, threatening facilities in Cuba is not unreasonable. It is the Soviet union itself which has disturbed the balance, and it is for it and Cuba to restore that balance.

The fact that we find ourselves in this dire situation may well have some salutary effect. Surely it is not too much to hope that some good will come out of the present dangerous situation. If these facilities were dismantled this would represent a first practical step on the road to disarmament, and if some such suggestion as I made a few days ago were coupled with international inspection of the process then we might well find ourselves taking the first steps away from the dangerous abyss that we have faced for so long in the world.

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