Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. When President Bush and I spoke last Friday evening it was agreed that the respective leaders of our defence forces would consult about the nature of any Australian involvement in a US led response to the terrorist attack on the United States. I can now report to you that Admiral Chris Barrie, the Chief of the Australian Defence Forces, in recent days has held discussions in Washington with General Myers, the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Franks, the Commander-in-Chief of Central Command in the United States, the Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Command Admiral Blair, and other senior people in the Pentagon. And Admiral Barrie briefed me and the Defence Minister Mr Reith this morning on the outcome of those discussions.

As a result I’ve instructed the CDF to have available a range of military assets including a detachment of special forces and air to air refuelling aircraft. We’ve already committed to an extension of the presence of HMAS Anzac which currently is serving with the United States Fifth Fleet as part of the UN’s Multilateral Interception Force in the Persian Gulf. Should the need arise we also stand ready to consider further contributions in such areas as long range surveillance aircraft and an amphibious command capability.

An involvement of the type that I’ve outlined would be very much within Australia’s defence capability and fully consistent of course with our obligations under the ANZUS Treaty which has been jointly invoked by Australia and the United States following the
terrorist attack on the 11th of September. There will of course be further discussions with the United States before the deployment of any Australian assets and of course the details of their deployment will be subject to operational requirements. I should emphasise the point I made after my discussion with President Bush and that is it should not be assumed that the American military response is something that will be comprised in one activity. It could in fact involve a series of activities over a period of time. And it is important that all of the diplomatic as well as military preparations that might be necessary are carefully attended to and put in place before any action takes place.

I did call the Leader of the Opposition after seeing Admiral Barrie and before this press conference to brief him on the outcome of the discussions that I’d had with Admiral Barrie.

I’d also like to inform you that yesterday the American Ambassador brought to me the same material that had been made available to the British Prime Minister from intelligence sources. The material was very lengthy. I read it over a period of half-hour or 45 minutes and returned it to the Ambassador. It was certainly very compelling and the material he presented to me it included some material that I of course was previously well aware of, but some new elements which you’ll understand I won’t go into, but collectively it amounted to a very compelling case in support of the allegations concerning bin Laden and his terrorist organisation that have been made by the United States and by others.

Do you have any questions?

JOURNALIST:

Do you have a time frame for the deployment of these assets?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I don’t. What has happened here is that once ANZUS was invoked that really put upon both sides an obligation to consult. I had the discussion with the President last Friday and we both agreed that we would get our respective defence leaders to talk about the character of any Australian contribution. That’s occurred. Now as to the timing, I think it’s fair to say that that is probably still a matter that is being assessed by the United States. And I think it’s important that people understand that this thing has got to be done with the maximum degree of preparation and the idea that the United States or indeed anybody, and of course it’s a United States led operation and the United States quite properly calls the shots, that there should be any rush before the proper preparations have been made. I think that’s unwise and President Bush has very wisely in my view counselled against that occurring. But I think it’s important that there be discussions as there have been at a military level and there’s a very clear idea in those discussions of the sort of involvements that would be appropriate for Australia. And I’ve asked that arrangements be made so that those assets can be ready and there’ll obviously be further
discussions and contact between Australia and the United States before any deployment takes place and naturally deployment with be subject to operational requirements.

JOURNALIST:

Do you know how many troops we are talking about?

PRIME MINISTER:

We’re probably talking about a squadron which is up to 150.

JOURNALIST:

So what do you see as your obligation with regard to Mr Beazley should deployment occur during an election campaign? Will you have to seek his agreement for that deployment or will you simply have to…..

PRIME MINISTER:

Well what I will do Malcolm is if a deployment becomes necessary I will of course talk to him and I would expect him to agree to it because he’s indicated broad support for what we’re doing. But I’m not going to try and be clever or take any political points in relation to this. It’s too serious. I want to pay all the courtesies that are due to the Opposition Leader. These forces if they go abroad will go abroad in the name of our country. They won’t go abroad in the name of my Government and therefore I will want to see that there’s proper consultation. But I will still be the Prime Minister and he will still be the Leader of the Opposition during the caretaker period. And the obligation is clearly, quite apart from any caretaker convention, the obligation is to consult the Leader of the Opposition extensively on something like this.

JOURNALIST:

I doubt he’d disagree but do you intend to get his approval?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I won’t presume to speak for him, he can speak for himself. But I’ll consult him as I should.

JOURNALIST:

Mr Howard, do you expect President Bush to go to APEC and do you intend to go to APEC?
PRIME MINISTER:

The answer is I do expect him to go to APEC and on that assumption it is currently my intention to go to APEC.

JOURNALIST:

Has the United States requested any of these assets be ready or are these our offer for them?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well a military power like the United States having the relationship it does with our defence authorities really doesn’t presume to sort of tell our people when to have things ready. They talk to our people and they’ve reached agreement in an operational way as to what would be a suitable Australian contribution. And the question of readiness is entirely a matter for us. But the assets will be ready on quite short notice.

JOURNALIST:

Will they be under US command or will they be under Australian….?

PRIME MINISTER:

The overall operation will be in the hands of the Americans naturally. But there’ll be a separate national command. I mean the Australian forces will all be under the command of an Australian commanding officer. There’ll be a separate national identifiable national command for the Australian forces, there’ll be separate rules of engagement for the Australian forces.

JOURNALIST:

Who is that officer?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we’re still giving consideration to that. When I say we I mean we’re waiting on a recommendation.

JOURNALIST:

How many refuelling planes will be committed?
PRIME MINISTER:

There’ll be two. They’ll be two Boeing 707s and on that basis I’ve already informed Mr Beazley that the 707s will not be available for the election campaign and there will be other arrangements made and they are in hand at the present time. They could include chartering some aircraft from Ansett which….

JOURNALIST:

[inaudible]

PRIME MINISTER:

….chartering a couple of aircraft from Ansett. But I’ve informed Mr Beazley that whatever the arrangement is it will be exactly the same for him as it is for me.

JOURNALIST:

Is the Anzac going to be indefinitely in the Persian Gulf?

PRIME MINISTER:

What’s the answer to that Peter? Yeah there’s going to be a replacement for Anzac in the Gulf.

JOURNALIST:

You described yesterday’s evidence as compelling. Are you personally convinced that Osama bin Laden was responsible for…..?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes.

JOURNALIST:

[inaudible] more of that evidence should be made public to reassure people of the detail?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well you’ve got to be very careful about making intelligence reports public because you run the risk of compromising sources. You’re not dealing with people who muck around.
JOURNALIST:

Has there been any indication of what role special forces troops could play in this campaign?

PRIME MINISTER:

I don’t want to go into that at this stage.

JOURNALIST:

Does Australia have any concerns at all of effectively going in on the side of the Northern Alliance?

PRIME MINISTER:

Going what?

JOURNALIST:

Going into Afghanistan on the side of the Northern Alliance?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well we certainly don’t have any concern about being involved in action against those people who were responsible for the terrorist attack. I mean you’ve sought to define that in a particular way. I choose to describe what we’re doing in another way and that is the objective.

JOURNALIST:

Does the United States need a security resolution before it goes into the Middle East?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think the United States has all the moral and legal authority it needs. The question of whether it seeks United Nations sanction as well is obviously an option. But it clearly has undoubted legal and moral authority to respond to these attacks. They are clearly an attack upon the mainland of the United States.

JOURNALIST:

Is your intention to go to APEC have any impact on election timing?
PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JOURNALIST:

… during the election campaign?

PRIME MINISTER:

I beg your pardon?

JOURNALIST:

Are you intending to leave the country during the campaign?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I do. Well I don’t think I’m giving anything away to say that I expect the election campaign will be underway when the APEC meeting is taking place. But I think it’s important even if it is damaging to my campaign, I think it’s important that in Australia’s interests that a meeting that will potentially bring together at this very difficult time for the world the President of the United States, the President of Russia, the President of China, the Prime Minister of Japan, and the President of Indonesia, I think it’s very important that the Prime Minister of Australia be at that meeting.

JOURNALIST:

And the caretaker period doesn’t have any impact on your ability to participate in those talks?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I don’t believe it does because many of the things that we’ll be talking about there are consistent with established policies. I mean the caretaker conventions preclude you from making appointments or initiating changes of policy. It’s a well known policy of this Government, I understand it’s supported by the Opposition, to pursue the broad goals of APEC and I would imagine that in joining action to condemn terrorism and the like, I would be speaking for the whole country and I just think it’s important that this time, even if we are in the middle of an election campaign, that the Prime Minister be present. Particularly if those people I’ve named are there and as you may know I wrote to President Xiang Zemin a few weeks ago asking that the question of terrorism be placed on the agenda at the APEC meeting and he has agreed to do that.
JOURNALIST:

Do you see a need for a formal declaration of war at any stage?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

JOURNALIST:

…is an important issue at this time, will you commit that if you win the next election you will serve the full term in the parliament?

PRIME MINISTER:

Denis as you know I said that when I got to the age of 64 I’d think about my future, I said that about a year ago. Quite frankly the last thing I want to do at present is leave Government because my overwhelming commitment is to see the Australian people through this new and very dangerous security and economic challenge.

JOURNALIST:

In relation to bin Laden and the information that you’ve seen, is the aim of the American led operation to wipe bin Laden out or to, as to President Bush has put it earlier on, to bring him to justice, the possibility of taking him to a court? If it’s the latter, do you think that the evidence that you’ve seen would be strong enough to run a case against him?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I think the evidence is very compelling, very compelling indeed. As you are aware Ian, the Americans have tried to pursuade the Taliban to hand him over. Obviously if he were handed over I think the Americans would go through some kind of process, I’m sure they would but he’s not been handed over and clearly the Americans are entitled to pursue a policy in those circumstances that has as its ultimate objective his destruction and that of his organisation.

JOURNALIST:

…acted yesterday on your request and is moving to freeze and seize assets of people you think are suspect in these matters. They listed the Taliban members among those, what evidence is there that there may be any of those assets in Australia or moving through Australia?
PRIME MINISTER:

Well I don’t pretend to have all of the evidence that might be around but as I’ve said previously, although there’s no evidence of cells there is evidence of sympathisers and connections and in the sort of world in which we live at the present time you’ve got to take all precautionary action that you can.

JOURNALIST:

Is there evidence of money though?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well as I say I don’t have all of that information in front of me because it wouldn’t automatically come my way because of the confidentiality of banking records and so forth. But I’m sure that the Reserve Bank is in a position to and that’s why the instruction’s been given to them to act in a particular fashion.

JOURNALIST:

Kim Beazley’s saying that a vote for Howard is a vote for Peter Costello. From your previous answer are you indicating that at this moment you’re saying to the Australian people you plan if re-elected on being there for the full term?

PRIME MINISTER:

No what I’m saying is what I said and the biggest question people have got to ask themselves at this election when it is called is in this very difficult time who do they want at the helm. Do they want a Prime Minister and a Government that’s led us successfully through many challenges and is clearly the more competent economic manager and also a person and a Government that has displayed determination against a leader and an opposition that has gone from one side of the street to the other several times on many major issues. That’s the choice the Australian people will face.

JOURNALIST:

Given that you’re saying that the times have changed, Mr Howard, do we then take it that you’re saying that your attitude to possible retirement dates has changed?

PRIME MINISTER:

Karen I’m saying what I said. I can’t be plainer than that.

JOURNALIST:

Would you like to clarify what you’ve said?
PRIME MINISTER:

No, no, you’re just trying to prolong the discussion. Thanks a lot.

JOURNALIST:

PM what are your plans this afternoon.

PRIME MINISTER:

To keep working and governing.

JOURNALIST:

What are the chances of a drive to Yarralumla?

PRIME MINISTER:

This afternoon? No.

[ends]