

Australia defends suspension decision

Agence France Presse

ABUJA, Dec. 8. — Australia today defended the Commonwealth's decision to extend the suspension of Zimbabwe.

"I think it is always dreadful when a country decides to go but the decision the Commonwealth took yesterday was the only decision, the only decision, consistent with Common-

wealth standards," Australian Prime Minister Mr John Howard told reporters here.

Mr Mugabe announced his country's withdrawal late yesterday after the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja chose to extend Zimbabwe's suspension indefinitely and set up a committee to review its progress to democracy.

Mr Howard said there was no

reason why Zimbabwe, which was suspended in March 2002 after Mugabe was re-elected in a ballot marred by violence and vote-rigging, could not rejoin the Commonwealth in the future. "The people are suffering greatly and their welfare and what is needed to improve their welfare should be our dominant concern," the Australian Prime Minister, who was on the panel to review the suspension, said.

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Australia to join missile shield

Canberra: Citing potential threats to the nation's security from missiles carrying weapons of mass destruction, the Australian government said on Thursday that it would join a US programme to build a high-technology shield against missile attack.

"We believe that taking part in the US programme will serve our strategic interest, help us defend Australia and allow us to make an important contribution to global and regional security," foreign minister Alexander Downer said in a statement. Washington hopes to develop a shield against ballistic missiles, arguing that "rogue states" like North Korea could soon have missiles to threaten the United States.

It wants allies such as Britain, Canada and Australia involved in the project, particularly for the use of satellite-tracking stations in their countries. Mr Downer told Parliament that there are "several countries in

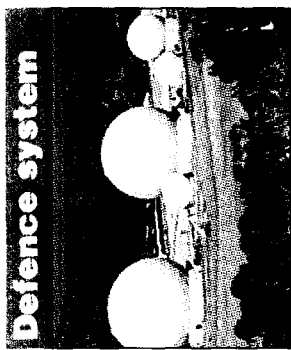
unstable regions" developing ballistic missiles that in some cases would have the ability to carry weapons of mass destruction. Australia's decision to join the project was a "long-term measure to counter potential threats to Australia's security and its interests from ballistic missile proliferation," he said.

US ambassador Tom Schieffer welcomed the decision, saying it will make Australia safer. "The recent experience that we've had with North Korea just underlines the need for this kind of system ... and I think that kind of system ... would provide for the defence of Australia as well as the US," he told reporters. The shield was not a defence against traditional pow-

ers like China or Russia, he said. "We are talking about some terrorist organisation or some rogue state launching a missile and trying to wreak havoc in the world," Mr Schieffer said. The United States was talking to "all our al-

lies about being involved and we hope that they will be, but hopefully there will be some others that will participate."

Canada announced in May this year that it had entered into formal talks with Washington about



joining the programme, but has yet to commit. Critics say the technology for such shields — dubbed "Son of Star Wars" — is complex, unreliable and expensive, and that the plans could spark a new arms race. Australia has been one of Washington's

staunchest allies over the past several years, pledging troops to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and stating clearly that its relationship with the US is central to the nation's long-term interest. Defence minister Robert Hill said Canberra will likely help in research for the multi-billion dollar project and has no plans for a ground-based missile defence system on Australian soil. It may incorporate a missile defence system into three planned air warfare destroyers for the Australian navy.

"We have given that careful consideration and we think that we can play a part, obviously a small part in terms of the massive overall program," Mr Hill told reporters. "We think that with the proliferation of long-range missiles and trends towards proliferation of mass destruction warheads, it is a sensible decision for Australia to take." AP

Australia bans six more Islamic terrorist groups

SYDNEY (AP) — Australia has banned six more Islamic terrorist groups, including Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Islami. The groups have been outlawed under Australia's tough terrorism laws, the government announced on Friday.

Attorney General Daryl Williams said the listing of the terrorist groups would deter Australians from becoming involved with them either as members, as financial backers or in a training role.

Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba were blamed for a number of suicide attacks and massacres in Jammu & Kashmir and also for the kidnapping and murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan ear-

ly last year. The other four organisations banned are Lebanon-based Asbat Al-Ansar, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Islamic Army of Aden and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. *AP*