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A RECENT VISIT TO BURMA AND INDONESIA

By SIR HAROLD ROPER, C.B.E., M.C., M.P.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on May 12, 1954, General Sir John Shea, G.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen, we are very fortunate this afternoon in having Sir Harold Roper to speak to us about his visit to Burma and Indonesia. He is one of those lucky individuals who have made such a good job of life that anything he has touched seems to be successful. I am sure he has deserved it, because going from Blundell's to Cambridge University he rowed in the 'Varsity boat; then, joining the Army for what I always call "our war," he was a captain in the Devons and won that coveted prize, The Military Cross. Later he turned his attention to business and was the general manager of the Burmah Oil Company from 1936 to 1945. In his record there is the modest sentence "Despatches 1942," which really means that he took a distinguished part in Burma in those troublous times. Sir Harold has now become one of our legislators and has been Member of Parliament for North Devon since 1950. He was a member of the Parliamentary Delegation that went to Burma in the early months of this year.

SIR HAROLD ROPER: I was very pleased to be invited to come here to give a talk on my recent experiences in Burma and Indonesia. I am very conscious of the limitations of my qualifications for lecturing on a quick 3-weeks' tour covering two large countries; therefore, I prefer that this should be a talk in which I give my impressions of the tour.

THE events in Indo-China and the discussions which are now going on at Geneva make it all the more important that there should be a correct understanding of the position in South-east Asia. It is not unnatural that there should be in South-east Asia a tendency for those smaller nations, which since the war have been established as fully independent nations, to look towards India, as towards a big brother, and particularly to Mr. Nehru as the dominating figure there. The recent Conference of Prime Ministers at Colombo shows how a conflict of local interest, such as about Kashmir or the Indian problem in Ceylon, by undermining confidence, can retard the development of a common policy and still more of a common plan to achieve it. I trust, and believe, that this will prove to be a passing phase, and that as the years go by initial difficulties will be overcome, mutual differences will be resolved and confidence will develop.

As to our own position in South-east Asia, during the years before full self-government was achieved in the countries associated with us, a bitterness against the British developed and spread widely amongst politically minded sections of the people. It was perhaps a natural result of a frustrated nationalism. With the last trace of control thrown over, the signs are that that spirit of bitterness is now rapidly disappearing and, although it is a thing uncommon in international affairs, I am happy to be

that much good that we have done is still remembered in those coun-

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tries, and that the reputation for straight and honest dealing which we have built up for ourselves, and which has surely been consummated in the final concession of full self-government, will serve us in good stead in the years to come, and will enable us in the closest friendship with them to continue to make a useful contribution towards their peaceful advancement.

It was with such hopes and aspirations that I accepted the invitation to take my place as a member of a parliamentary delegation, which visited Burma and Indonesia in January, stopping for three days at Karachi on the way home. Pakistan and Burma have been well known to me over many years. I was in Burma before the first World War, but Indonesia was new to me.

Organized under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, invited by the countries we visited, we had no axe to grind; our function was merely to exchange views and friendly feelings with others who, like us, believe that through the instrument of parliamentary democracy lies the ultimate solution of many world problems.

BURMA

On arrival in Burma we were at once struck by the cordial atmosphere; indeed, the warmth of the welcome we received, wherever we went, will remain with me as one of the happiest memories of our tour. That in eight short days in Burma we were able to visit Mandalay, Chauk, Pagan, Taunggyi and Moulmein, as well as to spend several days in Rangoon, testifies to the excellence of the arrangements made as well as to the advantages of air transport.

The country has by no means recovered from the consequences of the war. Law and order have not yet been restored. Government hold the towns, but there are areas where the various brands of rebels still hold sway, and whether one travels by road or river, an armed escort is a normal accompaniment. For instance, when we visited Taunggyi, although that part of the Shan States is not a rebel area, not only were we given an armed escort, but in addition the twenty miles of road from the aerodrome was closely picketed by troops. Moreover, although the railways are in operation, hold-ups by armed robbers are still a frequent, one might say weekly, occurrence.

The Burmese have maintained that the continued presence of Chinese Nationalist troops in far North-east Burma has been largely responsible for the insecurity elsewhere. For a considerable force has been employed in dealing with them, and too few have been left to tackle effectively the various rebel bodies still at bay in different parts of the country. It is to be hoped that, now that the bulk of the Chinese Nationalist troops have been evacuated, as reported in *The Times* a few days ago, a rapid improvement will be seen.

Some of the rebels are Communist in name, and a few individuals have experience of Communism. But apart from possible remote liaison with Communist China there appears to be little connection between them, still less with Russia. Militarily there appears to be nothing to prevent the Chinese Communists from walking in, but the independence of religion of the Burmese people makes it unlikely that they would ever turn Com-

munists. Another factor is that they are self-supporting in food supplies and will never go hungry. When I enquired as to the standard of living in the villages we could not visit because of the insecurity, I was told that the people in the villages say: "Previously we could feed and clothe ourselves and still wear gold; today when we have bought our food and our clothes there is nothing left with which to buy gold."

Another section of the rebels is the Karens. It never included more than a part of the Karen community and it was claimed that their number was steadily declining. The Karens are not normally inclined to Communism; it is unsuited both to their temperament and to their religion. But in the Irrawaddy Delta they have at times co-operated with the Communist rebels in their opposition to the Government. At the very same time in Eastern Burma other Karens have been in association with the anti-Communist troops in Kengtung, trading with them arms for food supplies.

In this country many who have known the Karens feel distress at the apparent failure of our own Government to champion the cause of the rebel Karens. They feel that we have let down our friends. For myself, I believe the Government of Burma have done their best to give the Karens a square deal, and that the dissentient Karens were at fault not to accept the offer which was made to them, at least as a basis for discussion. I share the regret at what has happened, for I myself have had many friends amongst the Karens. But one must not let one's heart get the better of one's sense of justice.

It is greatly to be hoped that the Government of Burma will by their actions soon succeed in winning over the confidence of the dissentient Karens.

In Burma, as also in Indonesia, the insecurity of the countryside has driven folk to the towns, and Rangoon and Djakarta have doubled and trebled in size, setting a housing and a servicing problem such as would strain the resources of a local authority even in normal times.

In the face of so many and great difficulties we were impressed with the practical manner with which the Government were tackling the job. Terribly short of experienced staff, and handicapped by the insecurity, nevertheless we felt that they had their feet on the ground. One of the Commissioners in Burma told me, with pride, that he had visited every township in his division. What interested me was not that he had visited every township but that he had regarded it as an achievement. I was impressed by the Rehabilitation Centre outside Rangoon, a large camp into which deserters from the rebels are taken. There is an endeavour to turn them into good and useful citizens by teaching them carpentry, smithy work, weaving and so on. The Burmans assured us that that was having valuable results. To the extent that it is possible to get to the villages the Government are paying considerable attention to trying to improve the conditions of those living in the villages by improving water supply, education, etc. They are going ahead with a welfare scheme. The Burmans are naturally jealous of their new independence, nevertheless they have not been above accepting advice from us. Americans also spoke to me of the good sense and excellent co-operation which they are ex-

perienicing in the course of making their own most generous contribution towards the rebuilding of the country's economy.

I have felt that this mark of their confidence in us is a tribute to our conduct of their affairs during the years that we were in control. Some have criticized that in the past we have been too slow in the rate of advancing of our overseas territories towards self-government. It was only on January 1, 1886, that the British finally took over Upper Burma. In 1937, fifty-one years later, I myself found myself one of only two European members of the Burma Senate. The Premier was a Burman. The Finance Minister was a Burman, responsible for deciding the rate of income tax which Europeans would pay. The Commerce Minister was a Burman, responsible for the terms of forest and mining leases to be granted to British firms. So much achieved in fifty-one years! And fifty-one years is surely not a long time in the life of a nation. And not only was it a firm grounding in parliamentary government which we have left behind, but much else besides, including a judicial system based on the principles of British justice, free from all political influence, and I was happy to learn that those principles are still being maintained by the present Government.

Burma has always been firstly an agricultural country, with rice her main crop. Her overseas trade development has been almost entirely in the hands of Indians, British and a few others, and in the past the Burmese people have never taken much interest in it. Moreover they are not given to saving, and so have little capital of their own to invest in new enterprise. Nevertheless the policy of the Government, and particularly of the Prime Minister U Nu, who impressed us very favourably, is ultimately to divert trade and industry into the hands of Burmese nationals, and, as a stepping-stone to that end, while private capital is building up, for the State itself to take its part in industry. Whether it will finally work out in that way, time will show. In the meantime a number of industries have been nationalized, including forestry, water, transport and electricity, and also the marketing of rice. The results appear to have been various; inland water transport is running smoothly and is showing a profit. On the other hand, their venture in the marketing of rice has been less successful. They have started just outside Rangoon a textile mill, an agricultural bank, a cotton seed farm and a dairy farm in an endeavour to improve the strain of cattle. A paper pulp factory and two sugar factories have been planned. A new method of Government participation in industry takes the form of the joint venture. The first experiment of this kind, the big mining concern, the Burma Corporation, appears to be working well. While I was in Burma the Government signed an agreement with the oil companies for a joint venture whereby the Government will take one-third share of the oil industry of Burma. Perhaps in the extension of the principle one may find a pattern of industry which will satisfy those national aspirations which have been the cause of so much heartburning in the past.

In concluding my remarks about Burma, I must again speak of the great warmth of the welcome we everywhere received. In a strongly Buddhist country I was particularly impressed at the hospitality extended to us in taking us into the most holy places in their pagodas. In the great Shwe-Dagon in Rangoon, for instance, we were taken not merely to the

main platform so well known to visitors, but to a still higher platform, to what we were told was the most holy shrine of all. The bars were unlocked, and as we were invited inside one by one to affix our personal tribute of gold leaf on the sacred image, our Burmese host of the moment, a trustee of the pagoda, made the significant comment: "In sixty years I have not been allowed that privilege." I could not help feeling that that was more than ordinary hospitality. It was something specially granted to us, and it would be a mistake to overlook it. The warmth of our welcome was a most important result of our visit. Although Burma decided to leave the Commonwealth, it demonstrated that at least we have retained a real friendship. And perhaps I may illustrate that by recounting an incident of a more personal nature. When our aeroplane touched down at Mandalay one of the first people I recognized in the crowd to meet us was U Kyaw, once a colleague of mine in the Burma Senate. He welcomed me most warmly. He was just on 80 years of age and he said that he would have met me in any case as a trustee of the pagoda later on, but that he felt he had to come to the aeroplane to meet us. And that is only part of the story. Later he was accompanying us to the old Fort of Mandalay. When we were looking at the site of the old Royal Palace, the last of which disappeared during the war, old U Kyaw pointed and said: "I was born over there." I replied: "Eighty years ago, when King Mindau was on the throne." He was the last but one of the Burmese kings. "Yes," replied my friend, "I can remember so clearly the British arriving." That old man could remember the British arriving to dethrone his king, and yet at the age of 80 he could come to the aerodrome to meet our delegation. I hope that is illustrative of the feeling towards the British in the country as a whole.

INDONESIA

In Indonesia most of our time was spent in Java, where the generous use of the aeroplane enabled us from our headquarters in Djakarta to visit Djogjakarta, Semarang and Surabaya in addition to seeing something of the countryside by road. We also spent an exceedingly happy two days in Bali, where we were able to see something of the ancient culture of that beautiful island. Again the hospitality we received from our Asian friends was almost overwhelming. The country spreads over a vast area of sea and land, but is sparsely populated except in Java, where the density of population is even greater than that of our own crowded island, being nearly 1,000 to the square mile. Its total population is about the same. Fortunately the island is highly fertile and the people industrious—as indeed they have to be, if they are to handle the three crops a year which the land produces. They possess also a high degree of skill, as is shown by the high standard of their handicraft, their wood-carving and silver-work, and by the artistry of their Batik textile designs.

In certain sections of their public services, including roads, railways and public health, they have inherited from the Dutch a standard above the average for the countries of South-east Asia. In education, however, the standard is low, and there is a general shortage of experienced staff to fill the higher administrative posts. I was glad to be informed by the head

of a British firm there that the proportion of literates is now rapidly increasing, but in spite of a great expansion of university facilities, it would appear to be inevitable that for some years to come there must be something of a hiatus at the level of higher education. In young countries there is sometimes a tendency to reduce standards of education in order to give a larger number of students a degree of some kind. There appeared grave danger of this happening in Indonesia. We visited in Djogjakarta a new university founded only five years ago. In five years it had risen to 7,300 students. They are in temporary buildings. In spite of a generally low standard of education the lecturers and professors are 85 to 90 per cent. Indonesian. One shudders to think of the sort of education which is being given there, but a British Council representative at work there appeared to be confident that the shortcomings would soon be rectified.

On the political stage the outstanding personality is Dr. Sukarno, the President, a striking figure whose sole determination is to see his country firmly established. There is a nominated parliament. There has not yet been an election, but we were assured that one would be held either at the end of this year or next. That in five years there have been five successive Cabinets suggests a fluidity of political opinion. Perhaps it would be a more correct interpretation to say that it indicates the strength of Sukarno's personal position, for throughout he has dominated the scene. That is not to say that he has the united support of the country; he has powerful opponents in the electoral field, and the insurrections in Celebes, in West Java and in North Sumatra show how limited is the present governmental control.

The fact that the Communists are supporting the present Government has given rise to some concern. There is no doubt that the Communists are working hard to extend their influence, and they are already well established in the trade union movement. On the other hand, the strength of the Islamic faith and a generally prosperous countryside are counter-vailing factors. Dr. Sukarno himself has always been firm in his handling of the Communists, and a probable explanation of his present attitude is that he is using the Communists to support him against other powerful elements. The danger of Communism, though serious, is not, I think, immediately imminent.

In these difficult circumstances progress in my view is handicapped in two main respects, by the nationalism of its citizens and by the irresponsibility of its labour. Indonesia today is in the grip of a dangerous inflation. It is not the only country in South-east Asia in which there is a tendency to use to excess an imposed machinery for labour negotiation. The best place to settle a labour dispute is on the factory floor, and an almost automatic reference to an industrial court bedevils true labour relations. Samuel Gompers, the great pioneer of trade unionism in America, once said that "Labour and management are like man and wife; they've got to get on together somehow." It is as true for Indonesia as it is for the U.S.A. that for the solving of such human problems a court, of whatever kind, is a poor substitute for personal endeavour. A higher scale of reward for services rendered is greatly to be desired in many countries, but if an inflation, harmful to the workers as well as to others, is to be avoided there

must be a self-discipline in labour affairs which will set a limit to exaggerated claims. That is my first point.

With regard to nationalism, President Sukarno, in a speech made in 1945, when the Republic of Indonesia was in its embryo stage, referred to the bridge, the golden bridge of freedom, and how on the far side of it a new society would be built up. Today it might be added that the crossing of that bridge was a highly emotional experience, but that in the great constructive work which lies ahead emotion should have no place. It must be based on realism. In the present state of world opinion there can be no question of the Indonesians being forced back across the bridge, and emotion may well therefore be laid aside. Realists in Indonesia recognize that, if progress is to be made, the primary need is for a sound economy. Independence must be meaningless without it. A potentially rich country, the organized development of its wealth has been largely in the hands of others, and particularly of the Dutch, who have provided the experience, the "know-how" and the financial backing. Official opinion recognizes the continued need of capital from overseas, but in deference to the fashionable and perhaps natural dislike of all things foreign, the policy designed to encourage it is so hedged about with conditions that it is in grave danger of failure to achieve its object. It is greatly to be hoped that those who realize the peril will have the political power to force appropriate action before it is too late. But in Indonesia the prospect is most uncertain.

I return to the theme on which I started. In South and South-east Asia we have a group of nations newly advanced to self-government, jealous of their position and striving to establish themselves on a sound and firm basis, economically and politically. There is a growing realization that in this modern world even the larger nations cannot live in isolation. As President Sukarno said in the speech to which I have already referred, "Our homeland, Indonesia, is only a small part of the world. Remember that."

Not unnaturally there is a tendency for the nations of South-east Asia to look to one another for support. It is well that they should do so in the face of the common danger which confronts all free nations. But I returned from my tour encouraged by what I had seen and experienced. Both in Burma and in Indonesia I found great goodwill towards us, and I am filled with hope that, just as India, Pakistan and Ceylon, as members with us of the British Commonwealth, so also Burma and Indonesia, which are outside it, will go forward in close association with us in a joint endeavour for the common good.

The CHAIRMAN: Sir Harold has kindly said that if any member wishes to ask questions or to comment on what he has said, he is here to help.

The HON. MRS. PHILIP MELDON: Just two questions. Firstly, I did not quite understand what "joint venture" meant in Burma. Secondly, both in England and elsewhere over the world I have worked in welfare. The lecturer's explanation of the danger of inflation so far as workers are concerned is the clearest I have ever heard. When an ordinary individual like myself tries to explain the dangers to the workers it is difficult always

to give a clear explanation. It seems that not only in Burma but also in England Members of Parliament and business men should explain such matters to the ordinary people.

Sir HAROLD ROPER: Years ago I became convinced that both in India and Burma labour negotiating machinery was being used to excess. During our tour in Burma I was pleased to have a number of interesting talks with Mr. M. A. Raschid. During the period of acute labour disturbance before the war I had known Mr. Raschid as the able advocate of the workers against the company which I represented. He is now Minister of Labour in the Burma Government. I was interested to be able to express to him the opinion, which I had formed, that at that time our company's labour organisation had been overdone, and that the result had been a lowering of the sense of responsibility not merely of the labour force but also of our own departmental employees. There was too great a tendency to say: "That is not a matter for us to settle. Pass it to the Labour Bureau." It hindered the development of a proper labour relationship.

As to the "Joint Venture," it is an arrangement reached by agreement between the Government of Burma and the oil companies operating in Burma, of which the Burmah Oil Company is the greatest. In effect, the Burma Government as a Government is taking a one-third share in the oil interests within the country in much the same way as the British Government has a large holding in the shares of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

I mentioned the Burma Corporation, a very large concern, which also is now organized as a joint venture. The directors are 50/50 Burmese and British, on terms of absolute equality to the extent that the British Chairman has no casting vote. Both sides therefore have to shoulder full responsibility for action taken, and I was informed that the arrangement was working extremely well.

Miss KELLY: With reference to the unsettled state of the country, I gather from the lecture that those responsible for it are called Communists; at the same time the lecturer said they had no connection with China or Russia. Is there any legitimate reason why the people concerned should be called Communists?

Sir HAROLD ROPER: The Burmese say that there are a very few individuals who have been to Moscow; they were insistent that only a few leaders are real Communists; they denied that it was a case of mere dacoity. Burma always was a country of armed robbers and there is still a lot of dacoity, but the Burmese denied that these rebel bodies were nothing more than that. In Burma in the old days one used to say that politics was a matter of individuals, of personalities, rather than policies. I came away with the impression that that still applies: that the rebel bodies are very largely personalities who have worked up a following. I asked one of my Burmese friends, "What makes the followers follow?" and his interesting reply was "Fear." Whether that is right or wrong, I do not know. I do not think one must pay too much attention to the name "Communist." It would be handy in the event of an invasion by Communist China for the Communists to feel they had a following in the country, but I do not think there is anything at the back of it. It is

rather like the old politics: individuals seeking power, and that search for power is greatly assisted by the aftermath of war conditions when there were a great many Japanese weapons left around the countryside, so that the armed robberies were not a matter of going in with a few pitchforks and so on, but they started off with mortar-fire on the villages. That is what is being dealt with in Burma and Indonesia as regards dacoity.

Wazir AMEER ALI: There is a rider I would like to add, without casting any aspersion on our guest lecturer. He stated that in the past there was bitterness against the British, which has now vanished. He wisely qualified that by saying that the bitterness developed amongst the politically minded sections of the people. We hear that said everywhere. Even my esteemed contemporary, Professor Arnold Toynbee, got a great fund of goodwill because the Indians were more friendly to him than to anyone else. Actually there was so much goodwill that there were 2,000,000 volunteers in the old British Indian Army from 1939 onwards. I think Sir Harold can confirm that practically none of the men in the old Burma Rifles who survived to march out joined the Japanese and that 99 per cent. of the Burmese tribesmen, Chins, Kachins, Karens and so on, were actively loyal to the Allied cause, especially the British cause, and 60 per cent. of the rest of the population in Burma were willing supporters. So far from very general bitterness against the old Imperial rule, my information is that there is, for the most part, general regret for its having gone, very widespread regret, apart from the politicians.

I submit that possibly that is the reason why the lecturer and his fellow delegates met with such a warm and cordial reception.

Sir HAROLD ROPER: I am glad to hear that, and I believe it to be true. It is true that I qualified my remark by saying the "politically minded." May I quote, in support of your comment, sir, an incident that I once quoted in Parliament? It was in the days of exile from Burma, when the Japanese were in Burma and the Government of that country had its headquarters in Simla. They had a series of reconstruction committees. There was one such committee on education on which I was the only non-official member. The late U Tin Tut, then Chancellor of the Rangoon University, was a member of it. A Burmese Minister was the Chairman. U Tin Tut, who was a distinguished member of the Burma Civil Service, was strongly nationalist, if not of the bitter kind, and kept backing his arguments with references to "public opinion." "Burmese opinion will not have this, or will not have that." One day another Burmese member of the Committee came out with what I thought was a very courageous little speech, courageous because it was a speech against his own Chancellor of his own University. This is what he said: "I cannot sit here any longer and listen to what U Tin Tut has to say about Burmese opinion. Every year in the course of my duties I interview many hundreds of parents and students and potential students, and I am convinced that what U Tin Tut calls 'public opinion' is not public opinion but the opinion of a handful of politically minded people with the backing of the Burmese Press." I think that answers the point.

Colonel GARSIA: Would the lecturer say a word or two about the

White Flag and Black Flag parties. I had an idea that they were both aspects of Communism. About eight years ago there were certainly two such parties, but we do not hear much about them in these days.

Sir HAROLD ROPER: I do not think the name White Flag or Black Flag party is particularly important, no more important than "Communist." It might be Mr. Jones or Mr. Brown—just a tag without very much meaning. Some are a little further Left than others, but they are all much of a muchness in their aim to win power. I am sorry I cannot answer the question with greater certainty.

The CHAIRMAN: I think Sir Harold has met many in our country wondering really what has been happening in Burma and Indonesia. We have been very fortunate this afternoon in hearing the conclusions to which you, sir, have arrived after your tour. It has been most instructive and deeply interesting to hear what you have had to tell. And the most encouraging thing of all is that after your experience in these countries you have been able to conclude on a note of hope. We thank you most sincerely and gratefully.



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