

BURMA TAKES HER TURN

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THE British Empire is strewn with Burmas, territories acquired often at haphazard, but capable of valuable service when chance brings the war-clouds their way. The case of Burma herself is classic. Until recently she was an appendage of India; overlooked because of that, perhaps; vaguely known to some as a source of oil-share dividends, an inspiration to writers of novels about stolen rubies, the home maybe of pagodas and the road to Mandalay. Six years ago she figured rather obscurely in the news when India was given a new constitution and Burma was made a partly self-governing, separate Empire unit. Then came the war, and the sudden renown of the Burma Road, a vital link between beleaguered China and the outer world. But that rather unfortunate incident did not bring Burma, as such, into prominence. Something more was needed. Indeed, the tide of war had to flow immediately against the Burman shores before the immense importance of this country in the British Empire's strategic scheme was fully appreciated.

That tide was—and is—represented by the "peaceful penetration" of Japan not only into Indo-China, bringing her against the Shan States, but also, by more devious means, into the counsels of Thailand or Siam, bringing her to Burma's southern boundary and within reaching distance of the Indian Ocean. Thus Burma is suddenly seen to stand as an invaluable bastion between the British Empire's vital store- and supply-house of India and the insidious advance of Oriental aggression. Her admirable strategic position, if it were necessary to defend India from the east, is abruptly and eagerly conceded in terms of her natural resources as well as topographical circumstances. The Empire-builders who fixed those shrewd boundaries last century, flanking China at her most mountainous, a sterilised Siam, and then stretching halfway down to the Malay Peninsula, are justified at last. But the oil, timber, minerals and manpower of Burma, ready to supply defending forces at Singapore and elsewhere in the outer screen, are perhaps their most vital legacy.

Certain facts about Burma may therefore be studied with a new interest. The country has an area of 250,000 square

miles—equal to that of pre-war Germany—and a population of 15,000,000—twice that of Australia. Before the war she exported £80,000,000 worth of oil, rice, timber, oil-seeds and minerals annually. She is mainly an agricultural country, less industrialised than any territory of her size in the British Empire. Her paddy-fields sent over 3,000,000 tons of rice to India and Ceylon before the war, and the peasants of those lands would starve without her contribution to-day. Vast quantities of teak, a virtual monopoly of Burma, were sent to naval yards all over the world; they are now reserved for Britain's feverish shipbuilding, especially available for the many new slips that have been erected in India and Australia. Her oil-seeds and ground-nuts, with her considerable product of cotton, have always fed the Empire's cattle, soap-factories and looms; their employment in British, Indian and Australian munition factories now is manifold.

But the mineral wealth of Burma is perhaps the most important in war-time. Normally some 200,000,000 gallons of kerosene and petrol, valued at £13,000,000, are exported annually, mainly to India, and the exports of metals and ores vary between 150,000 and 200,000 tons a year. Under pressure from a Defence Council formed in Burma after the outbreak of war, the production of oil has been greatly increased. The petroleum is capable of refinement into the best aviation spirit—the number of oil-fields in the world that produce this vital commodity, are relatively few—and Burma now supplies most Royal Air Force units that operate east of Suez.

Similarly the production of tin and wolfram in Burma has been increased since the outbreak of war; the output of lead has been accelerated to satisfy the demands of India's new munition factories. Since wolfram is essential in the manufacture of high-grade steel, supplies from Burma, the world's largest producer, have great importance, and without them the great foundry recently established in Australia would be crippled. Nor does this survey exhaust the field. Even Burma's ruby mines, nestled in the back-country beyond Mandalay near the Yunnan border, have been working overtime to supply industrial precious stones for the precision instruments of modern war. Once again, Burma is one of the largest producers of such stones in the world.

That is the supply-potential of Burma in the front-line. What of the human element? The best answer is provided, perhaps, by the fact that since the beginning of British occupa-

tion, when the Burmese armies were defeated because of their poor organization and temperamental disinclination for war, a handful of white overseers has been sufficient to keep the country happy and at peace. The word "happy" is used with deliberation, for the true Burman is never so content as when free to till his soil and worship his gods without let or hindrance. He is unique among men in that the itch never takes him to cross the border and despoil his neighbour. That is the true Burman of the plains. There are others, the hill-tribes like the Kachins, Chins and Karens, but they do not dominate the country. Besides, they are always immobilized in emergency by recruitment with local defence forces, an enjoyable occupation for their sturdy spirits.

Four years ago, responsibility for her own defence was imposed on the Government of Burma, as the result of separation from India. Much was done to organize and equip the Burma Defence Force before war broke out, and much has since been achieved in providing for new and urgent requirements. Nearly 10,000 men have been trained already to defend their own districts, and there are besides many half-trained bands of irregulars, and a Burma Frontier Force which guards the dangerous borders. The Shan States, those wild and remote pockets between Burma proper and Indo-China, region of giant rhododendrons and pestiferous swamps, have contributed a special force at their own expense. A Burma Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve has been constituted to patrol the strange waters from Akyab to Irrawaddy in the Bay of Bengal, and from Martaban to Kra among the curious Mergui Archipelago. An Auxiliary Air Squadron has been formed. The gentle Burman of the plains, though unhappy as a soldier, is valuable in technical arms, as those who knew the Burma Sappers and Miners in the last war will remember. He is now the ideal air-craftsman. Like all Orientals, moreover, he has from the first been quick to appreciate the value of air-power.

Thus Burma was among the early donors of a complete unit—the Burma Squadron—to the Royal Air Force, bearing the national emblem of "a peacock in its pride," and paid for in countless individual rupees of a £250,000 Burma War Fund. The Shan States have given some £60,000; one ruler, the Sawbwa of Tawngpeng in Upper Burma, sent £10,000 to the Lord Mayor's Fund in London for the Red Cross. A certain chief of the Chin Hills, Pun Za Maug, making a contribution of Rs. 500 (£37), practically emptied his little Treasury for the purpose.

Such actions, taken with the fact that Burma is daily increasing her output of war materials, make it unnecessary to dilate upon the "loyalty" of this country under the stress of war. It is certainly a reflection on Japanese propaganda, however, that Burmans since the outbreak of war have made little attempt to turn the difficulties of their suzerain power to their own account. Speaking in August, 1940, the Premier of Burma (Hon'ble U Pu) said: "It is Burma's bounden duty to place all resources of men, money and material at the disposal of Britain for a speedy and successful termination of the war." Nor was that an inspired statement. The Burman may be tractable and unwarlike, but he has a shrewd brain and quickly assimilates what western civilization can offer in the way of education. When the country was separated from India and given its first measure of self-government, there was no lack of able Burmese politicians to fill administrative and even executive posts.

Meanwhile the Japanese propaganda, though blocked and countered as much as possible, took every opportunity to convince the Burmese that their chance had come—coupled with the promise that Japan, as leader of the Asian new order, would eventually arrive to assist the "enslaved" to "freedom." But indeed the only positive result of this unremitting effort has been a minor agitation on the part of advanced Burmese elements for quicker constitutional advancement. That agitation reached its height, significantly enough, when British fortunes in Europe were at their lowest last year; it has since been laid aside to allow concentration on the accelerated war effort, and to facilitate defence preparation against the Japanese menace!

Reference has been made to a Burma Defence Council. The composition of this is interesting, in view of what has been said about political aspirations. The Council was created shortly after the outbreak of war to "simplify and expedite consideration of and decision on problems created by the war, both in the interests of the people of Burma and to ensure the successful prosecution of the war." Subsequent expansion of the body provided for a majority of Burman representatives, while later a representative Burman was appointed to the key-position of Counsellor on Defence to the Governor. It is the avowed policy of the British Government to accord Burma successive measures of self-government as the country proves itself capable of exercising such powers according to British

standards. Undoubtedly the process will be accelerated by the war, as it has been already, and it is not fantastic to envisage Burma among the new Dominions that will be born in the present conflict, and that will add to the number of completely independent states within the protective union of the British Commonwealth of Nations.

But meanwhile national aspirations, like all ideals, are in the martial melting-pot, and Burma, brought right to the front by Japan's association with the enemy and Asian penetration, can only concentrate on defence. It must not be overlooked that if Japan were foolish enough to proclaim war on the democracies, she would have only two military courses. One would be a perilous march across those difficult Shan States into Burma and towards India, after pushing the French forces in Indo-China aside and sweeping the advanced Chinese from the mountains. The other would be an advance with Thailand's connivance through that country to strike either at Rangoon, a mere seventy miles across the Thai border, or at North Malaya. Both courses seem pretty fantastic. Everything would—and will—depend upon the issue of the world war elsewhere. The Japanese fight best when your back is turned. But it should never be forgotten that Tokyo has been talking for years about the possible cutting of a canal through the Kra bottleneck of the Malay Peninsula—on the narrow strip of Thai territory there—to give Japan an outlet to the Indian Ocean and effectively to "by-pass" Singapore.

So Burma stands to arms. For years she has been, if not neglected, at least overlooked in the British Imperial scheme of things. Fortunately that typical British attitude did not permit of active oppression or virulent exploitation of the Burmese. The country was kept under, but allowed imperceptibly to rise again; and in the testing-time it is discovered by the inhabitants that they would rather continue towards greater freedom under British rule than hazard even that for the vague chance of dancing at a Japanese rope-end. They step into the front-line bravely, though they may like it no more than anyone else; and they are saluted as comrades-in-arms.