

SIAM.

[August 6, 1926.]

CONFIDENTIAL.

SECTION 1.

[F 3158/78/40]

No. 1.

Mr. Waterlow to Sir Austen Chamberlain.—(Received August 6.)

(No. 120.)

Sir,

Bangkok, June 30, 1926.

FIRST impressions, although necessarily superficial and subject to future modification, sometimes derive a certain interest from their freshness. I therefore venture to submit the following remarks for what they may be worth:—

2. On the whole, I am agreeably surprised by Bangkok and by the Siamese. I had expected to find a more or less corrupt and incompetent Government, seated at an unhealthy if not actually pestilential metropolis, dependent upon palace intrigues, drawing tribute by primitive methods from a shiftless and indolent population, and kept straight, if at all, by a few European advisers. I heard nothing at Penang to make me hope for anything better; on the contrary, the most gloomy notions as to the conditions of Bangkok and of Siam generally prevail there and in the rest of the Straits Settlements. But this picture is the sort of half-truth that effectually distorts reality. Indolence, corruption, incompetence—all the fruits of the Oriental mentality when applied to practical affairs—are indeed present and all-pervading. But they are largely corrected by a tradition of hard and serious work which has already produced remarkable results in many departments of administration and for which I do not think that the Siamese have received enough credit. The capital contains crowded quarters, native and Chinese, where life pullulates, on water as well as on land, in a fashion shocking to the Western mind but probably more satisfactory to those concerned than our own slums are to their inmates. Yet Bangkok is not unhealthy, and has coped successfully with the cholera epidemic that was at its height when I arrived. It is provided with most of the amenities of civilisation, including tolerable roads, electric light, electric trams and an admirable water supply; but excluding drainage. In some of these respects some British settlements in the East are behind Bangkok, which has had electric trams and light, for instance, for more than thirty years. In fact, at every turn there is evidence of a spirit of energy and enterprise. The most striking example is perhaps the development of the railway system (there are now over 3,000 kilom. of track) on which Mr. Consul-General Johns is reporting by despatch in the Overseas Trade Series. What is wanted is indeed more roads rather than more railways, and it may be questioned whether the building of new railways—an activity which has the merit in Siamese eyes of being good window-dressing—is not being carried too far, and whether its economic basis is altogether sound; but in any case, what has actually been done in this sphere is surely remarkable for a people living in a tropical climate where energy comes in bursts and sustained effort is unnatural. Progress, again, is being made in the administration of justice; the recent changes in high places have been all to the good, and probably the Siamese Courts, even in the present transition period, are better than those of any other Eastern country not under European tutelage, except perhaps Japan and some of the Indian native States. Government finance is conservative; the present position is excellent, and it would be brilliant if the Siamese could be persuaded to spend less on armaments and to realise that all they need is a small, mobile and efficient force, with modern equipment, for dealing with internal disorder and disaffection. In short, in most of the points that distinguish polite from semi-civilised States this people has already reached, so far as material things are concerned, a level of rough and ready efficiency which is surprisingly high when their temperament is considered, and the difficulties, physical and social, which have had to be overcome—the sparse population of their large areas of mountain and jungle, the semi-independence of local potentates a generation ago, and the absence of anything like a properly organised civil service. Complete illiteracy is rare except among old people.

3. If it be said, as is undoubtedly true, that these results could never have been attained but for the help given by European advisers and the development of the country's resources by Chinese labour and European (particularly British)

[1380 f—1]

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