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Cotton Cultivation of the Gash Lands of Kassala Province, Soudan

Editor's Note.—The following article is reprinted from "The Socialist Review," (London), January, 1924. We present it here as indicative of the interests governing British policy in the Soudan. Major General Stack has been assassinated since the article was written.

IN the Report on the Finances, Administration and Condition of the Soudan in 1921," which was issued as a White Paper to the public about a month ago, we learn that an event calling for "exceptional notice" and likewise "the most important" was "the discovery" that the funds provided under the authority of the Soudan Guaranteed Loan Act, 1919, by which Act the British Government guaranteed an amount of £6,000,000 for the construction of the Makwar dam on the Blue Nile and the canalisation of the tract of land known as the Gezira had proved insufficient for this purpose.

Accordingly, Major-General Stack, Governor-General of the Soudan, and Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, along with three members of his Council, proceeded to London in July, 1921.

Owing to certain very obvious facts which the British Treasury could not possibly ignore, and "after considerable discussion," the Soudan authorities were asked for a further guarantee from British public funds.

In the predicament in which Major-General Stack and his Council found themselves of being refused a further guarantee, with seventy-five per cent of the original loan of £6,000,000 in the hands of the underwriters, and unable to raise funds privately, they decided, with what funds still remained—which by certain manipulation were increased to £1,000,000—to protest what construction work had been completed and to close down the works to a minimum.

Makwar at that time possessed an attractive and almost suburban appearance, and was a well-laid-out town with pleasant villa residences occupied by the chief employees of the Construction Company and certain Egyptian and Soudan Government officials. The work of construction that had been attempted on the dam was negligible.

In the meantime, and with the idea of impressing the British Government with the scheme, Mr. Hopkinson, of Messrs. Pearson's, was invited by the Soudan authorities to visit Makwar to make "an examination of the methods and cost of finally completing the work."

Mr. Hopkinson had difficulty at first, even with the authority of the Soudan Government, in obtaining access to the books of the Construction Company, the head of which concern was a Greek, of Alexandria, Egypt, who had been offered and had accepted from the Soudan Government to undertake the work of constructing and completing a dam over the Blue Nile at Makwar on a ten per cent. basis of cost.

Mr. Hopkinson, after a month or two, returned to Khartoum from Makwar early in 1922, and rendered his report. He felt it necessary to condemn the method under which the work had been carried out; in fact he went so far as to state that he could not find "a single redeeming feature" anywhere.

There had been no care exercised by the Soudan Government and practically no supervision. An inspector of the newly-formed Audit Department had, it is true, spent an occasional few months at Makwar, but his reports had raised no comment—certainly no adverse comment—and the Construction Company appeared to enjoy the explicit trust of the Soudan Government, who left them to disburse the £6,000,000 in whatever manner suited them and as speedily.

It therefore came as a discovery, we are informed, when less than two years had elapsed since the project had begun, to find that funds placed at the disposal of the Soudan Government by the British Government guarantee had evaporated, and the Blue Nile dam and canalisation scheme, which was originally estimated at £2,000,000, had absorbed three times that amount with nothing tangible to show for it.

Mr. Hopkinson recommended that the works should be closed down to terminate the existing contract; that the works should be re-opened at a subsequent date and continued afresh to obviate as far as possible the effect of the past waste, and that the construction works should be given to a reliable firm of British contractors.

The Construction Company raised objections to this proposal, and intimated to the Soudan Government that they had been offered and accepted the work of constructing and finishing the Makwar dam. Terms were therefore agreed to between the Construction Company and the Soudan Government which were evidently satisfactory to the Construction Company. Publicity that would have resulted from legal appeal by the Construction Company to the Cairo Courts—the results of such proceedings could hardly have passed unnoticed in Great Britain—was thus obviated. The Soudan Government to put up a defence would have presented the anomalous position of condemning for graxe neglect what their own lax policy and own neglect had in great part occasioned. The contract with the Construction Company was cancelled early in 1922, and the Soudan Government faced with the necessity of having the project closed indefinitely or of finding additional funds to continue the work.

In March, 1922, therefore, Major-General Stark again proceeded to London accompanied by three other officials.

The British Treasury were again approached, and, after careful investigation and enquiry, felt themselves unable to alter their former decision and recommend a further guarantee of British public funds. Furthermore, they reminded Major-General Stark that the Soudan Government had not paid the interest on the original loan of £6,000,000 which was much overdue.

The Soudan Plantations Syndicate, who have been interested in the cotton-growing industry in the Soudan, saw their opportunity.

Major-General Stark and his Council were placed in the position of either accepting an offer made to them, and on terms made to them, or of having a derelict proposition on hand with a grave scandal of waste and neglect attached to it.

In due course a deputation of prominent politicians and interested members of the Soudan Planta-

tions Syndicate waited on the Lords of the Treasury and pressed for recognition the claim of the Soudan Government for a further guarantee to complete the dam on the Blue Nile, and they also added a matter of even far greater significance, namely, a guarantee of an additional amount for the construction of a railway through Kassala Province to tap valuable land suitable for the growing of cotton.

The result of the powerful influence brought to bear by this deputation was the guarantee by the British Government of a further loan of £3,500,000 for the completion of the Makwar dam scheme, and a loan of £1,500,000 for the construction of a railway through the valuable cotton lands of Kassala Province, of which the most valuable are known as the Gash lands.

A company known as the Kassal Cotton Company, consisting of a directorate of those interested in the Soudan Plantations Syndicate, have been granted by Major-General Stack and his Council a concession for cotton growing in this vast and most valuable area in Kassala Province, and there is an understanding with the Soudan Government whereby the Soudan Plantations Syndicate or any affiliated company controlled by them shall have the monopoly of the cotton industry of the Soudan—which is the one staple and profitable industry in the Soudan.

The Gash lands are watered by the Gash river which rises in the mountains of Asmara in Eritrea, and enters Soudan territory about sixteen miles south of Kassala, the chief town of Kassala Province in North-Eastern Soudan. On occasion of flood a khor, known by the name of Kwenti, some six miles south of the town, carries the overflow water which spreads out over a fertile region of large extent. A few miles north of the town the river widens, and here issue the streams known as the Eastern and Western Gash. The Eastern Gash has a flow in a normal year of about fifty miles, which may be increased in a normal year of high flood to one hundred miles. Its channel for the first twenty miles is very deep in places, at which spot two branch streams known as Tokar and Filik issue forth to spread themselves over a further area, while the Eastern Gash continues to spread out increasingly until a point is reached when the flow is directed northward in one broad stream that widens considerably until it is two miles in extent in places. The Western Gash has an average flow of forty miles, and its waters lend themselves easily and simply to the system of irrigation practised by the native cultivators.

The native cultivators irrigate their lands by constructing "shioles" or artificial irrigation channels cut off at angles from the streams, and are already privately occupied—and have been so for many years—of the lands in this region where extensive developments planned by the Kassal Cotton Company will eventually take place.

The Soudan Government will in all probability follow their usual practice of land seizure whenever it suits their purpose, and by enforced ordinances compel the native cultivators of the Gash lands to forgo their holdings and all their hereditary rights thereto, either by exchange, by direct seizure, or forfeiture. The policy of the Soudan Government as

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