CHAPTER XX

THE SUDAN : 1925 ONWARDS

THE Annual Report upon the administration of the Sudan for the year 1925 opens with the following words: "The year will always be one memorable in the "history of the Sudan for the completion of the "Sennar Dam and the canalization of 300,000 feddans "of the Gezira plain. This great work which in July "brought water by gravitation for the cultivation of "areas hitherto dependent on the vagaries of rainfall "removes a formidable obstacle from the path of "economic development and marks the beginning of "a new era."

The Gezira scheme was able indeed in its early years to show very gratifying financial results which had a marked effect upon the figures of the Sudan budget. But the Government were prudently alive to the fact that such a source of revenue must be liable to violent fluctuations and their wisdom was to be fully, if unfortunately, justified by the slump in the prices of primary products which before long was to overtake the whole world.

The following table taken from the administration report for the year 1927 is interesting as showing the effect upon Government finance of the large development schemes undertaken since the War: especially when it is remembered that a large proportion of the

Gezira receipts were not credited to revenue, but were set aside to form an equalisation fund against bad years.

	1925	1926	1927
Normal administrative revenue	2,289,609	2,153,764	2,139,848
Government commercial undertakings	105,124	135,014	117,933
Railways and steamers .	1,909,650	2,115,999	2,180,753
Egyptian contribution .	562,500	750,000	750,000
Gezira revenue . .	..	703,212	721,411
	4,866,883	5,857,989	5,929,945

Meanwhile the Kassala project had been meeting with exceptional difficulties, which had to be solved in 1927 by the resumption of the concession originally granted to the Kassala Cotton Company in the Gash delta in exchange for a new concession in the Gezira, and it was still uncertain whether a substantial and regular revenue could be depended upon to result from the Government's operations in the concession now resumed. But it could not be charged against the Government that they had been improvident in their forecasts, or incautious in their contemporary policy: and the general plan of economic development was proceeding gradually but steadily and without serious set-back.

One very great advantage of the cautious pace of progress was that time was given to fit the economic developments smoothly into existing social and administrative schemes. The native of the Sudan cultivates land which is his own property, and this fact is one of the foundations upon which the social and administrative institutions of the country are built. The Gezira scheme altered nothing from this point

of view: it brought with it no revolutionary changes. With the aid of scientific methods it improved native cultivation and production "without hindrance to or "alteration of the normal social development of the "community". When on January 21, 1926, I had the privilege of performing the opening ceremony of the Sennar Dam, I made special reference to this important aspect of the scheme in the following words: "I desire "finally to touch upon another important considera- "tion of a more general character. The ties between "the Government and the peoples of the Sudan have "always been those of personal friendship, and it is "a first principle of the Gezira scheme, as it will be "of any similar projects which may be undertaken in "this country, that so desirable a relationship should "be sedulously preserved. The development of the "people along their own natural lines is, the Govern- "ment believes, essential; and organized improve- "ment of material conditions will not be allowed to "result in the loss or debasement of the traditional "ideas which form the basis of the character of the "people. I look confidently to the leaders of thought "in the Sudan, whether religious notables, tribal "chiefs or men of special education, to play their part "in maintaining for the future the happy conditions "which exist to-day in this respect."

The policy of leaving administration as far as possible in the hands of native authorities, and of guiding these authorities so that traditional usage might be assimilated to the requirements of equity and good government, has already been described in the previous chapter. It has been criticised by some experienced authorities on the ground that it was commenced too late. These authorities contend that during its early years the administration was too much

obsessed by the fear of Mahdiism and in consequence paid too much regard to the necessity of winning over religious as opposed to secular local authority. The contention may very likely be substantial, but the mistake has since the War been rectified as far as possible. Now, at any rate, the policy stands as a logical attempt to apply the theory of "indirect rule" which has inspired so much of our African colonial administration. There is as yet no reliable evidence for concluding that the policy, cautiously applied, does not offer the best means of development towards self-government that has yet been evolved. It certainly appears to possess very great advantages over the theory which held the field in the days when policy was being formulated for our earlier-acquired Asiatic dependencies. But while the latter has reached a much more advanced stage, the African experiments are still young and still have most of their political difficulties ahead of them. Of them all, the Sudan is likely to be in the long run the most difficult as well as the most interesting. It will have to deal with races differing widely in origin, in language, and in the stages of their civilisation. Although the south is still a part of darkest Africa, the north has communications, which may increase and grow closer, with the Mediterranean sea-board and so with the tendencies of Europe and the West.

It is, for instance, a much-travelled airway, and as air transport develops it is inevitable that the Sudan will become a through route for a constant stream of air-borne traffic. Already it has had to resist strenuous arguments urging the employment of the air-arm as its chief medium of pacification and defence. It has been suggested that the Air Force can do all the work of ground forces much more efficiently and can

be linked up into intimate connection with the work of the civil administration, but, so far, projects of this nature have been resisted. The value of the work that can be done by the Air Force in a country like the Sudan is very high indeed, but it must not be over-estimated, and, when all has been said in its favour, it must remain auxiliary to the ground forces.

The Governor-General of the Sudan put the case well in a despatch which I had the duty of forwarding to the Secretary of State.[1] He described the true use of the Air Force as follows:

"If we have an efficient Air Force at Khartum and "a well spread ground organization for them, we have "reason to believe (*a*) that Mahdiism, that potent but "latent menace, will never be able to sweep us from "the West. Its concentrations will be broken and "scattered in mid-career at the further outposts. "There will be no disasters like those of Hicks Pasha "and Baker Pasha in the eighties; no siege of Khar-"tum. The eyes and the weapons of the Air Force "would render impossible any repetitions of those "tidal onslaughts of hordes of fanatics. The internal "defence problems of the Sudan become simple: "(*b*) that the petty municipal intelligentsia of Khar-"tum, Omdurman and other lesser cities, who have "lent an ear in the past to the sedition mongers of "Egypt, have wit enough to see what the Air Force "can achieve. By impressing this class of mind the "Air Force does much of its best work and stabilises "the political situation: (*c*) that remote garrisons of "the Sudan Defence Force are linked up efficiently "with headquarters and the outside world by this "swift power of communication, and that the risk of "mutinous tendencies in the native ranks is mini-

[1] F.O. Despatch: Lord Lloyd to Sir Austen Chamberlain, July 6, 1928.

"mised: (*d*) that in all cases of grave emergency the "Air Force supplies means of rapid communication "and investigation, enabling early steps to be taken." He went on to point out that the problem of the civil administration in the semi-savage areas was a difficult and complicated one, calling for very careful, deliberate, and tactful handling. When trouble arose, it was essential that it should be dealt with on the ground by a careful exploratory advance conducted with a view to make touch with the disaffected and establish understanding, so that good relations might be instituted from the first. In view of the importance of this consideration, it was essential, he urged, that authority should be selective in its targets and should use infantry for its ground contacts.

He was able to illustrate his contentions very tellingly from actual and recent experience. The Air Squadron, which had recently as a trial measure been stationed at Khartum, had, almost immediately after its arrival, been ordered to take part in two different operations, both very typical of the kind of work that was so likely to devolve upon the administration of the Sudan. In the Upper Nile Province a witch-doctor of the Lau Nuer, named Gwek Wonding, had adopted during the previous year a hostile attitude and had for a considerable period openly defied the Government. There was danger of the trouble spreading through his tribe, and as the efforts of the District Commissioner to get in touch with Gwek by peaceful means had proved unavailing, it was decided that military action must be taken. On December 13, 1927, it was reported that the followers of the rebellious witch-doctor numbered 4000 and that certain hostile bodies were in the immediate neighbourhood of a village called Nyerol, where the main Govern-

ment force was established on December 15. The Royal Air Force made several preliminary flights by way of demonstration and warning and then carried out a series of bombing attacks upon hostile concentrations, which had the result of breaking up the organised resistance. In the view of the Governor-General the Squadron had carried out the work demanded of it with the highest degree of efficiency and mobility, but the lessons to be drawn from the action still remained the broad lessons outlined in the quotation given above. It was doubtful whether any direct immediate results had been obtained from the Air Force co-operation, but the moral effect was undeniable and was bound to prove a valuable factor in the further handling of the disaffected area. The second operation in which the newly arrived squadron had been called upon to take part was also directed against a section of the Nuers, by whom, at the instigation of one of their chiefs, the District Commissioner, Captain Fergusson, had been murdered. The murder had led to a general rising among the surrounding sections of the tribe, although it was probably in no way intended as a signal for such a rising but simply as a means of removing an officer who, owing to his knowledge, was likely to be a source of trouble to the chief concerned. Retirement into the swamps of their native territory was counted upon by the rebellious tribesmen as a complete checkmate to punitive action by the Government troops. The activities of the Royal Air Force, therefore, came upon them as a complete and very unpleasant surprise. The ground forces held them and their herds encircled in a cordon while the aeroplanes bombed, and the effect of two or three days of this treatment was the complete breaking of their warlike spirit, and

a clear realisation that the damage done to their cattle was a retribution for their own folly. It was due to the co-operation of the Air Force that the retribution meted out in this case was swift and effective. But, as the Governor-General pointed out, the planes had a general target of hostile tribesmen who had been hunted by the infantry into marshy lands, where these concentrations would have been otherwise inaccessible. "Not only was it a clear target: it was a "target composed of tribal elements in the bombing "of which there was no ground for compunction. It "was necessary to punish swiftly and severely those "tribal elements which had complicity in or sympathy "with the murder of a British officer."

The lesson to be learnt from these two operations was clear enough and seemed undoubtedly to reinforce the general conclusions laid down above. In the operations consequent upon the murder of Captain Ferguson, retribution was the goal, but even so the Air Force could not have acted successfully except as auxiliary to the ground forces. Moreover, the general character of future operations was much more likely to resemble that of the action against Gwek Wonding, the witch-doctor, and in that case the prime necessity was for establishing pedestrian contact and understanding, and it was important that the innocent should not suffer with the guilty. Here there could have been no doubt that the Air Force could not have contributed to a salutary permanent result, except in a definitely auxiliary capacity and as reinforcing the pacifying authority by the moral effect of an impression of power.

Apart from the lessons to be learnt in regard to the employment of the Air Arm, the conclusion to be drawn from these operations was summed up as

follows by the Governor of Bahr-el-Ghazal, the province concerned: "There can be no question that the "policy and methods of native administration as "followed in this province have successfully stood the "severest test to which they could be put. The steadfastness of the loyal sections during this rising "clearly shows the measure of control that has been "established. The great benefit reaped in the present "instance was the support of these loyal sections, "which not only confined the trouble, but by narrowing the area of actual operations, enabled the rebels "to be swiftly dealt with. The future depends on a "continuance of the administration on the same "lines."

This conclusion was sound enough in regard to the still backward areas of the Southern Sudan, where there were some tribes which had hardly as yet come under effective administration, and others which were still sunk in ignorance and superstition although gradually becoming amenable to the discipline of civilised authority. But these areas differed by a vast measure from the more civilised territory centring upon Khartum and Omdurman, where Egyptian seditious propaganda had already succeeded in planting a seed which had germinated in 1924 sufficiently to give a warning of what the future might bring forth. And meanwhile Mahdiism, though a latent, was still a powerful force, which in view of the fanatical temperament of the population of the Western Sudan, had still to be seriously reckoned with. The son of Mohamed Ahmed el Mahdi of 1881 was still living at Omdurman, still held in veneration as the true Messiah by some of his more fanatical adherents from Darfur and Kordofan, still respected as the son of his mighty father by more moderate

elements. The Government had pursued towards him what might unkindly have been described as an opportunist policy: while he himself professed a loyalty latterly somewhat bewildered, and made the most of the marks of favour which authority from time to time bestowed upon him. The situation was, therefore, one of infinite variety, containing elements of potential danger from widely differing sources, but upon the whole politically not unsatisfactory.

The economic position was considerably more speculative than the political. It depended entirely upon climatic conditions and almost entirely upon the production of two commodities—cotton and gum—the prices of which were and are liable to violent fluctuations, and which are produced in concentrated areas. The greater part of the country was therefore being administered at a loss, and was dependent upon surplus revenues being provided from the comparatively small favoured areas. It was still essential, therefore, that every effort should be made to extend the basis of the country's economic structure by developing transport and other facilities in the unproductive areas. This was bound to be a slow process, and it was only safe to pay for it out of current resources and not by piling up a load of debt. Among the grave dangers which the Treasury had to fear and prepare against was a prolonged continuance of low cotton prices—a danger which was very shortly to materialise. Apart from the possibilities of danger inherent in the normal financial position of the Sudan, there were important administrative tasks which called urgently to be undertaken. It was imperative that as soon as possible military charges should be met from the country's own revenue: that substantial reductions should be made in taxation and in the

scale of railway charges. Until this could be done there was always the possibility that discontent might be engendered and there was always the certainty that private enterprise, particularly in the southern provinces, was not being provided with the freest opportunities for development. The consequent lack of attraction to private enterprise entailed, upon Government the task of undertaking new developments together with the financial risks involved, and so added to the speculative nature of the economic position.

Such, within broad limits, was the position of the Sudan at the time when I was holding the office of High Commissioner at Cairo. The succession of Egyptian political problems which succeeded one another with such bewildering rapidity prevented me, much to my disappointment, from acquainting myself as closely as I should have liked with the day-to-day conditions in which the work of the administration was being carried on. None the less I had paid a visit to the Sudan in the first year of my tenure of office, and was able again to make a tour of inspection in 1929, leaving Cairo on January 23 and returning on March 5 by way of the Red Sea. During this tour I was able to visit every province of the Sudan, with the exception of three, covering a distance of 5000 miles, and to gain a vivid first-hand impression of the problems of the country and of the excellence of the officials who were handling them on the spot. The knowledge thus acquired was, however, not destined to be practically applied; for, as previous chapters have related, the period of my sojourn in Egypt came very soon afterwards to a close, and with the subsequent history of the Sudan it is not my province to deal.

I must leave that great country, therefore, still

upon the threshold of its manhood. That, under the aegis of British central administration, it will grow to a prosperous maturity, I am profoundly certain. I am equally sure that British protection alone can guide its developments into right paths. I shall not attempt any forecasts as to its ultimate attainments. It still remains to be seen whether its so diverse components can ever be welded into a coherent whole and whether its traditional systems have in them the vitality to ensure a steady and vigorous growth. At the present time it is experiencing a period of leanness which cannot but be immensely discouraging to the devoted band of officials who for so many years have been striving to build secure foundations and waiting in the keen hope of seeing permanent prosperity arise upon them. An inscrutable Providence vouchsafes to very few overseas administrators the gift of seeing the fruit grow where they have planted. It is as much as they can reasonably hope for if they can carry away a conviction that their labours have been upon sound lines and that the results will endure at any rate for a season. That will inevitably ensue if the present policy of cautious advance is continued, and if nothing is attempted which is not well within the powers of the administration and of the native systems. The essential test to which all proposals should be submitted is the test of whether they will advance the welfare and prosperity of the people of the Sudan.