

The telegram ended with the conclusion:—

"If Japanese press boldly westwards without pause for consolidation and are not deterred by offensive activities or threats by Eastern fleet or American fleet, nor by rapid reinforcement of our air forces in N.E. India, our Indian Empire is in grave danger."

7. May and June seemed likely to be the critical months for India. It was, therefore, disturbing to me to find that at the end of April the Eastern Fleet, instead of being strengthened, was likely to be further reduced for operations in the Mediterranean to provision Malta, that two brigades of the 5th British Division, on its way to reinforce India, were being diverted for the capture of Madagascar, to which also was being sent an East African brigade which I had been led to expect for Ceylon; and that the Australian Government was demanding the return to Australia of the two brigades in Ceylon.

I protested with some vigour, but the Minister of Defence, who had to look at the whole picture, decided that the attempt to relieve Malta must be made; that Madagascar should be occupied to secure the sea route to the Middle East and India; and that it was necessary for political reasons to release the Australian brigades.

Events proved his judgment correct; and the danger to India never developed. Great efforts were made to build up our air force; and during the summer two British divisions (2nd and 5th) gradually arrived. By July, when the monsoon broke, the critical period for India had passed.

#### DEFENCE OF NORTH-EAST FRONTIER OF INDIA.

8. Meanwhile, as described in my despatch dated the 14th July, 1942, the troops in Burma, under General Sir Harold Alexander, were being driven northwards; and after the Japanese break-through to Lashio in the latter part of April and the consequent collapse of Chinese resistance in N.E. Burma, I had to order the withdrawal of the Burma Army across the Indian frontier into Assam. This was completed by the 20th May.

The situation of Eastern Army (Lt.-General Sir Charles Broad) which was responsible for the defence of N.E. India was by this time as follows:—

*IV Corps* (Lt.-General N. M. S. Irwin) was responsible for the defence of Assam. The Burma Army (17 Indian Division and 1 Burma Division) passed under his command on arrival in India; apart from them he had only one brigade (1st Indian Infantry Brigade), which had been moved from the N.W. Frontier into Manipur State and was astride the Palel-Tamu road; and one battalion of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade.

*XV Corps* (Lt.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse) was responsible for the defence of Bengal against seaborne invasion or an advance up the Arakan Coast. It comprised 14 and 26 Indian Divisions, both incomplete, and certain troops which formed the garrison of Calcutta.

*70 British Division* (less one brigade group in Ceylon) was at Ranchi with the rôle of meeting any seaborne expedition which landed on the Orissa coast; it also constituted the only reserve available for Assam or Bengal.

Thus IV Corps had some 500 miles of frontier to guard with little except the tired and disorganised Burma Army; while the XV Corps

with two incomplete and partially trained divisions had to secure some 400 to 500 miles of land frontier and sea-coast. The 70 Division (two brigades only) was responsible for another 200 to 300 miles of the coast-line besides acting as general reserve. There was, until the arrival of the 5th British Division at Bombay, which was not completed till the 20th May, no other reserve available in India.

9. Certain auxiliary forces were formed to assist in the defence of N.E. India. On the frontiers of Assam and Bengal local levies were raised amongst the hillmen of the Lushai, Chin and Naga hills; this force, which amounted to some 2,500 men, was known as "V" Force. It was of doubtful fighting value but would have been of value to watch hill tracks, collect information and to harry the enemy's line of communications had he advanced into the hills. A force was also organised to man river boats to patrol the great waterways that intersect Eastern Bengal. It was known as the Sundarbans Flotilla.

#### THE TRANSPORTATION PROBLEM.

10. Apart from the small number of troops available, the defence of N.E. India was complicated by the poverty of the communications from the rest of India into Assam and Eastern Bengal. Assam is cut off from the rest of India by the great Brahmaputra river which is unbridged throughout its length. Its level fluctuates during the year by as much as 25 feet and its course sometimes by several miles. The railway system east of the Brahmaputra was a single track metre gauge with no modern train control system and very limited resources in locomotives and rolling stock. The system was served by wagon ferries at two places over the Brahmaputra capable of dealing only with a very limited number of wagons per day. There is no all-weather road from India to the west bank of the Brahmaputra, while the only west to east road in Assam was the second class single width road which ran from Gauhati ferry to the North-East; so that the deficiencies of the railway could not be replaced by road transport; indeed, all vehicles had to be transported to Assam by rail. Nor could river transport solve the problem. Many steamers had been sent earlier in the war to the rivers of Iraq, and the river system merely led to the railway system on the east bank, which was the limiting transportation factor.

On the Bengal front, communications were no better. The delta of the Ganges is unbridged; and the railway, which terminated a short distance beyond Chittagong, is single line, metre-gauge. Some small use could, however, be made of sea transport.

11. I have already in my Burma despatch of the 14th July, 1942, given some account of the endeavours to construct a road from Assam to Burma. At the same time (about February, 1942) the construction of an adequate railhead and advanced base at Manipur Road station on the Bengal and Assam railway was undertaken. At the time this was a wayside halt in the heart of dense jungle at the spot where the road to Imphal takes off. It was unfortunately intensely malarial. Here a railhead had to be laid out in a short time, to handle 1,000 tons of stores a day, eventually rising to 2,000 tons, while depot areas had to be made to hold a