

needed my personal attention and made it impossible to hand over to anyone else. I suggested instead that a general meeting in Cairo or Baghdad with General Wavell and Air-Marshal Peirse from India would be of great value. At length it was arranged that Sir Stafford Cripps should stop in Cairo on his way to India and explain the views of the War Cabinet. General Nye, Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was to accompany Sir Stafford.

The visit of a member of the War Cabinet and of the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff was most valuable in that they became acquainted with the problems of the Middle East to an extent which was impossible by telegraphic communication. When the three Commanders-in-Chief had explained the situation to him, Sir Stafford Cripps summarised the results of his investigations in a telegram to the Prime Minister, of which the following were the salient points.

At that time our strength both in tanks and in the air was altogether too low to offer even reasonable prospects of an offensive being successful. In about a month's time our air forces, now weakened by heavy diversions to the Far East, should again have been built up to a strength sufficient to allow them to undertake and sustain intensive operations. Our armoured forces would take longer to prepare, however, because the American "General Grant" tanks, with which new units were now being equipped, had to be modified before they could be used in the desert and because the crews had to receive special training. By the middle of May we should have an effective, trained armoured force of 450 medium tanks with sufficient reserves, and 150 infantry tanks in addition.

For the rest, the date of the offensive depended upon the tank strength which the enemy could attain, which in turn depended upon our ability to interfere with his communications. Apart from one Liberator there were no aircraft either in Malta or the rest of the Middle East capable of reaching Tripoli, nor were Baltimores yet available to bomb Bengasi by day. Sir Stafford urged that heavy bombers and more light bombers should be provided: some of the heavy bombers which were then attacking Germany might profitably be sent to the Middle East.

Mid-May, Sir Stafford suggested, should be accepted as a target date for beginning the offensive: to launch it earlier would be taking an unwarrantable risk. Even this date was conditional upon certain essential requirements being fulfilled: that the "Spitfires" remaining in Gibraltar should be sent to reinforce Malta; that long-range heavy bombers should be despatched at once; that every effort should be made to hasten the delivery of light bombers from the United States; that fitters should be sent by air to help prepare the reserve of tanks which was vital to the offensive; and finally that demands on the Middle East to send aircraft to India or elsewhere should cease.

I had explained that we might have to withdraw aircraft from Libya in the event of Turkey or Cyprus being attacked or of the Germans penetrating the Caucasus, and that, in consequence, we might lose air superiority in the west and be forced to abandon the offensive with serious results. Sir Stafford Cripps

alluded to this possibility, but considered that this was a risk we should have to take unless we were to give up all hope of an offensive until the autumn.

General Nye brought with him a questionnaire from the Prime Minister and Chiefs of Staff designed to secure information on all points about which they were in doubt. These questions, twenty in number, affected all three Commanders-in-Chief and the answers were naturally based almost entirely on information supplied by the Joint Staffs, though the responsibility remained with General Nye.

In his telegram General Nye explained that no offensive operations were justified before the 15th May, and then only if our own tanks outnumbered the enemy's by the requisite amount. The only ways in which the date could be advanced were by interrupting enemy shipping to Libya or by increasing the output of our own tank workshops. Even then training was a limiting factor. The Middle East Defence Committee thought it well to stress the point made by General Nye that 15th May was only a tentative date dependent upon the rate at which the enemy could build up his tank strength. They added that any favourable opportunity before or after this date would be taken.

An exchange of telegrams in early April showed that our difficulties and problems had been admirably presented in London. The Chiefs of Staff and the Middle East Defence Committee were now substantially in accord on questions affecting Libya, Malta and the Northern Front. In replying to the Chiefs of Staff review, though, we felt bound to emphasise our great need of heavy bombers and anti-aircraft artillery.

In the Far East, however, matters had gone from bad to worse. Superior Japanese naval forces had established themselves in the Indian Ocean, and our ability to hold Ceylon and Eastern India, it appeared, depended almost entirely on the strength of the air force we could build up. In consequence, the Chiefs of Staff could now hold out no hopes of sending even a squadron of Liberator aircraft to the Middle East for several months and felt obliged to draw further on our existing naval and air forces. Moreover they said that they could not risk sailing a convoy to Malta from the west during May.

This latest withdrawal of aircraft did not affect the date on which the offensive could begin in Libya, but it was bound to affect very seriously our ability to sustain the air effort once battle was joined, since we should lack reinforcement aircraft and crews. This made it all the more imperative that we should receive heavy bombers so that we might impede enemy reinforcements to the utmost.

The position of Malta was now extremely disturbing. The acting Minister of State, Sir Walter Monckton, had recently visited the island to investigate labour problems and reported that the position was very grave indeed. The decision not to sail a convoy from the west during May, therefore, moved the Governor to a strong protest. The island's chances of survival, he declared, were materially reduced because it was not possible to carry on without food or ammunition. We could not count on more than half of the ships sailing in the May convoy from the east reaching Malta and it