

was imperative not to rely on this alone. Moreover we could not afford to repeat the experience of the previous convoy, when out of a total of 30,000 tons of stores despatched to Malta only about 5,000 were received: aerial protection must cover not only the arrival of ships, but the period of preparation and unloading. General Dobbie ended by saying that drastic action was needed: more Spitfire aircraft were required in addition to those already allotted, and the air force must be regularly reinforced.

Relief, it now seemed, must be deferred until June when it was hoped that a strong escort for convoys from the east could be provided and that our Libyan offensive would have begun. There was no certainty that either of these conditions would be fulfilled, so that the Middle East Defence Committee repeated their request that a convoy should also sail from the west. Meanwhile we were obliged to instruct the Governor to impose even more stringent rationing and to hope that the island would be able to continue its gallant resistance.

The steady deterioration of the situation in the Indian Ocean gravely affected our plans in the Middle East, and we begged the Chiefs of Staff to acquaint us more fully with developments in that theatre. On the 23rd April we received a long and detailed appreciation of the situation. In discussing possible Japanese plans, an attempt to invade Ceylon was not ruled out, although it seemed more likely that the Japanese would try to exploit their success in Malaya and Burma by advancing into India from the north-east. For the time being we were in no position to offer effective resistance by sea, land, or air to any offensive. Should the Japanese press boldly westward without pause for consolidation, the Indian Empire would be in grave danger. In that event the security of the Middle East and its essential supply line would be threatened. The Middle East and India were therefore interdependent.

So gloomy was the picture thus painted that I felt it demanded a complete reconsideration of our plans. In a paper prepared for the Middle East Defence Committee, I pointed out our present weakness owing to lack of reserves; that we should run great danger, if we were to embark on an offensive in Libya without reserves, sufficient to enable us to carry it through to the Agheila marshes; and that the risk was the greater, seeing there was always the possibility that our supply lines through the Indian Ocean might at any time be cut. I was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that, although the fate of Malta might be sealed, in the circumstances depicted by the Chiefs of Staff, we could not afford to take the offensive in Libya. We should rather concentrate on strengthening our defences in the Middle East and spare all we could to reinforce India in the hope of checking the Japanese advance before it should be too late.

My colleagues on the Middle East Defence Committee were inclined to believe that the Chiefs of Staff review presented the situation in its worst aspect. We were all agreed, however, as to what we could do in the Middle East to save Malta or spare to help India, and decided to inform the Chiefs of Staff accordingly.

We explained that, in view of the serious threat to India disclosed in their appreciation, we felt bound to give the Chiefs of Staff full

information about our ability to help India and to mount an offensive in Libya, so that they might decide whether we should continue to prepare for the offensive. Although we could spare no air forces, I believed I could send an armoured brigade group, a motor brigade group and two infantry divisions, all seasoned troops and well equipped, assuming that we stood on the defensive in Libya. This was possible, since it now seemed that no new danger would arise before August or even later, and that, even when our forces in Cyrenaica had been reduced, the enemy were unlikely to muster sufficient strength for a serious attack for about three months. In the latter assumption, as events proved, we were wrong; but the comparative strengths of our own and the enemy forces in Libya at that time and the general tactical situation on that front seemed to warrant this conclusion.

The Prime Minister replied at once, saying that the situation had improved in the last fortnight, and that, although the next two months would no doubt be critical in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, there were no special grounds for assuming that an invasion of India was then imminent or certain. Having described the various measures that were being taken to strengthen our position in the Indian Ocean, he concluded by saying that the greatest help we in the Middle East could give would be to engage and defeat the enemy on our Western Front.

The date by which we could be ready to launch the offensive, unfortunately, had now receded. The rate of increase in our own tank strength had fallen very little short of the estimates given to Sir Stafford Cripps three weeks earlier; but, owing to our inability to interfere effectively with his shipping, the number of tanks the enemy was likely to possess by the middle of May now approached the highest figure we had mentioned. Moreover a new Italian armoured division had been brought over, although it was not yet up to strength. We therefore informed the Chiefs of Staff that, provided that this new armoured division did not materialise, we should now be ready in mid-June. If the division did appear, we should have to postpone the offensive until August. We also explained that success would depend on our retaining supremacy in the air.

I was then informed by the Prime Minister that it had been decided that an offensive must be launched as early as possible, preferably during May, in order to save Malta. We thought it necessary, however, to point out that, in the event of our armoured forces being destroyed as a result of launching an offensive prematurely, we should not be able to hold our prepared positions on the Egyptian frontier for lack of armour, but should be compelled to retire to El Alamein. The peril in which Egypt would then stand would probably have worse results than if Malta were to succumb. The War Cabinet were prepared to accept this risk, being determined that Malta should not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by my army for its retention. I was instructed to launch the offensive in time to provide a distraction to help the passage of a convoy to Malta in the dark period in June.

The Northern Front.

It was fortunate that the Russian winter campaign had so thoroughly dislocated Axis plans that the much-heralded spring offensive had to