

German use of the aerodromes in Syria came through. I therefore postponed the meeting until I had further instructions which were on the way down to me from Middle East. I had no longer any doubts as to our reasons for continuance of the blockade.

95. It now became necessary to consider to what extent Jibuti port and harbour were vital to our needs, so as to recommend to the C-in-C a line of future conduct vis-a-vis French Somaliland.

The port might be required for the evacuation of the Italian civilians from Abyssinia, and again it might be vital to us for military purposes. It will be recalled that I had come to the conclusion that although it was desirable to evacuate the civilians from Abyssinia as soon as possible, limitations of transport, and the necessity of providing accommodation en route would under any conditions render the evacuation a slow process. Moreover there was no real shortage of food for the civilians and I was informed by the political branch that they could be fed until the end of November. The question of the evacuation was not therefore a matter of the highest degree of urgency. On the other hand I had been informed by the Political Evacuation Committee that they considered the use of Jibuti vital for their purpose. They felt that the dangers to health involved in establishing staging-camps on the 300-mile road link between Diredaua and Berbera precluded the use of this route. It was therefore apparent that at some time or other Jibuti would be required for evacuation purposes.

On the military side the use of the port and railway would be most desirable, not only because of the great saving of transport due to the cutting out of the Berbera-Diredaua road link, but also on account of the greatly superior port facilities as compared with Berbera. At the same time I was able to maintain three brigades from Berbera, and there was no need at this stage for a larger force to liquidate the Italians, nor did it appear that I would ever have to maintain more. The port therefore, though desirable was not vital to me from the military point of view.

96. The situation was then that the use of Jibuti though desirable for all purposes was only vital to us for civilian evacuation.

Hence it occurred to me that there would be very great advantages in the matter of the evacuation of the civilians being handled on a higher plane with the Italian Government itself. We could deliver the evacuees at the French frontier after which their onward journey would be the responsibility of the Italians.

All arrangements could be made between them and the French direct. There was an Italian Armistice Commission in Jibuti with whom, under a white flag we could arrange local details direct and there would be no need to approach the French at all. The question of the provision of ships, on which I understood tentative feelers had met with some response, and the journey through French Somaliland could be treated as one question on a governmental level as far as the British were concerned.

If this policy were successful we would be left without need to negotiate with the Governor in French Somaliland at all, and there would be no necessity for the somewhat

awkward situation of carrying out negotiations with Vichy under the flags of the Free French which were established at all accessible points near the frontier. Furthermore there would now be no reason to make any concession in respect of the blockade and the full policy of only raising the blockade if the Colony became Free French could be enforced.

I wrote to the C-in-C to the above effect on 25th May, and also suggested that if he was in agreement with the policy, all that would now be required would be to inform the Governor of French Somaliland that in view of the situation in Syria he refused to treat with him.

97. In due course I received a letter from General Wavell for delivery to the Governor of French Somaliland. The letter informed him that the blockade would be maintained until the Colony became Free French, that steps would be taken to see that the population were informed of the true situation, and that a month's supplies of all kinds were ready to be rushed to the Colony as soon as they gave in.

98. This letter was delivered on 8th June, and on 10th June leaflets were dropped on Jibuti giving the gist of the letter. Meanwhile Free French pamphlet dropping, which has been suspended, was resumed, and permission was given to the French sloop to operate in territorial waters and stop the dhow traffic from the Yemen. Furthermore a successful operation for a landing at Assab, from which place there were indications that supplies had been entering French Somaliland, was initiated by Aden with 3/15 Punjabis from Berbera, under Brigadier W. A. Dimoline, O.B.E., M.C., of the 26th E.A. Brigade, and with supporting arms from E.A. Force. 2/2 K.A.R. of 26th E.A. Infantry Brigade (which had replaced 2nd S.A. Brigade on the departure of the latter to Egypt) was moved on to the French frontier on the Zeilah road and at Daouenle. All steps were taken to tighten up the blockade from the landward side, by preventing Somali traffic across the frontier.

The operation against Assab took place with success on 11th June. The enemy were surprised and very little resistance was encountered.

99. On 15th June a reply to General Wavell's letter by the Governor of Jibuti was passed over the frontier. The letter reviewed the steps already taken by the Governor to try and initiate negotiations for the use of the port and railway for "humanitarian purposes." It also drew attention to a communication made by him to the Governor of Aden to the effect that owing to malnutrition some infant mortality had taken place, and it re-affirmed the rigid intention of French Somaliland to remain under Vichy. No reply was sent to this letter.

100. There arose at this time the question of the possibility of the reduction of French Somaliland by force of arms. The defences of the country were mainly centred round Jibuti. These consisted of a strong concrete trench system about 12 miles long with both ends resting on the sea, outside which were three forts on the main communications into the town. Outside Jibuti, forts with small garrisons, but consisting of very strong concrete defences, existed at Hol Hol, Ali Sabiet, Dikkil and Hadji, and other minor positions