

Personal note by Lord Ismay on the situation in India (5 October 1947)

Caption: In a personal note dated 5 October 1947, Lord Ismay, Chief of Staff to the British Viceroy of India Lord Mountbatten, analyses the consequences of the partition of the British Indian Empire. He particularly mentions the violent clashes between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims that have been caused by population movements.

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TOP SECRET

THE INDIAN SITUATION

A PERSONAL NOTE BY LORD ISLAW

SECTION I

1. On my way back to India from England towards the end of last July, I concluded my notes with the following passage:-

"I was worried when I was in England at the prevalence of the idea that everything was over bar the shouting. Personally I feel that we are nothing like out of the wood yet. There is so much explosive material lying about and it remains to see whether it can be prevented from going off. I am, for example, extremely worried about the Sikhs. They imagine that they are going to get a far more favourable boundary than, so far as I can judge, the Boundary Commission can possibly award them. All possible precautions have been taken by the despatch to the areas of potential trouble of a joint India-Pakistan force under single command, but even so it may be a very unpleasant business. The truth of the matter is that both sides are in a panic, and people do sillier things when they are frightened than they do under the stress of any other emotion."

2. These views were shared by many people. It is therefore a mistake to imagine that the storm which broke out in August, and which is still raging, was unexpected. It must, however, be frankly admitted that neither its character nor its extent were anticipated by anyone in authority, whether in India, Pakistan or England.

3. The last two months have been so chaotic that it would be difficult to find two people who agree as to how the trouble started, why it was not checked, what has actually happened, and what is to be the outcome. While, therefore, I have thought it right to set out in this paper my personal conception of the past, and my estimate of the future, I do not claim that either would receive any general measure

of acceptance. This paper has been written in the air on my homeward journey. I had no time to do it earlier. Therefore it has not been seen by the Governor General.

SECTION II

4. As the date for the transfer of power drew nearer, it was obvious that considerable trouble was brewing in the Punjab, and that the Sikhs in particular were up to mischief.

5. Much of this was based on surmise and rumour, as the Intelligence Organisation had already run down, but a specific report was received from the Governor of the Punjab giving details of a Sikh plot to paralyse train movements to Pakistan. Thereupon the Viceroy, after secret consultation with Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel and Mr. Jinnah, decided to round up the ring leaders, including Tara Singh, on the eve of the transfer of power. This decision was subsequently cancelled on the advice of Nehru, Patel, Sir Lytton Jeejeebhoy, Governor of the Punjab, and the Governor of the E. and W. Punjab. Mr. Jinnah claims that, had the original decision been implemented, the trouble would have been nipped in the bud. Personally I doubt it, unless the swag had been much wider than at first proposed.

6. At all events, there was a good measure of confidence that the Punjab Boundary Force would be adequate to deal with any situation that might arise. The regiments of which it was composed had so far shown no trace of communal feeling. As recently as the first week in August, the Hindu officers at G.H.Q. Delhi had given a large farewell party to their Moslem brother officers, in the course of which speeches had been made testifying to their comradeship of the past, and swearing eternal blood brotherhood for the future between the armies of India and Pakistan. It was difficult to believe that within the space of three weeks, the ingrained mutual trust of a lifetime - indeed of many lifetimes - would be dissipated. But this, alas, is what happened.

7. Nor did the hope of a speedy and successful outcome rest solely on the armed might and continued solidarity of the Punjab Boundary Force.

The determination of the leaders on both sides to co-operate in grappling with the problem was patent from the outset. As early as the 17th August Nohru and Liaquat went off together to Amhala, Lahore and Amritsar to concert measures for dealing with the disturbances. The situation in these places immediately - but alas only temporarily - improved. and there was a general confidence that, so long as the leaders on both sides were determined to co-operate in this frank and friendly manner, nothing could go very far wrong.

8. This confidence proved - for the moment at any rate - ill founded.

The leaders took the correct decisions, but they were not implemented. Administration was weak: forces that were too strong were at work: uncontrollable impulses had been unleashed: hundreds of thousands of refugees were already on the move, presenting easy targets for grizzly revenge. The flames spread throughout the Punjab and into the heart of Delhi itself.

9. On the 5th September the Governor General and I returned to the capital. We found the situation already critical in the extreme: and for the next five or six days it got progressively worse. Moslems were being systematically hunted down and butchered. Thousands of them were herded into camps, where the conditions defied description - no food, no water, no sanitary arrangements, not even assured security. The dead lay rotting in the streets, because there was no-one to collect and bury them. The hospitals were choked with dying and wounded, and in imminent danger of attack because of the presence of Moslem staff and Moslem patients. Arson and looting were widespread. Food supplies both wholesale and retail were disrupted, the first because consignments arriving by train could not be unloaded and distributed for lack of labour: the second because all markets and food shops were closed in terror. The Moslem members of the Delhi police had either deserted or

were dismissed: the Hindu members had either been suborned or were afraid to do their duty. There was only a handful of troops - and some of these were of doubtful reliability. Appeals for protection poured in from every side - public utility services, hospitals, refugee camps, the Corps Diplomatique, and so forth. The telephone system ceased to function for lack of operators, as did the posts and telegraphs. Public transport was suspended because the drivers were terrified to venture on the roads. Administration was hampered by the absence of clerical staffs, who could not get to their offices. Reports of horrors, sometimes true, such more often false, inflamed men's passions, and excited their fears. Nowhere was there reason. Delhi was on the verge of chaos.

more often
false

10. It was a situation which would at the outset have temporarily disrupted any Government in the world, however efficient and however determined. The Government of India were thrown off their balance, but sprang into action with energy and determination - albeit with considerable inexperience. At the instance and with the guidance of the Governor General, a Cabinet Emergency Committee was set up the day after our return. This Committee at first met every day, and occasionally most of the day: and it has ensured, to an extent which could not have been achieved by any other means, first that decisions on questions of policy are reached in the shortest possible time, and secondly that these decisions are implemented as quickly and effectively as resources and ability permit.

11. Similar Emergency Committees were set up in Delhi and in the East Punjab: and both of these keep in constant touch with the parent Cabinet Committee. This imitation of established Cabinet practice and procedure in England has produced the most valuable psychological as well as material results. It seems for the moment at any rate to have stopped the rot.

SECTION III

12. At this point it will be convenient to set out the salient features of the position as I left it on the 3rd October.

13. The refugee camps in Delhi - both Moslem and Hindu - are now, comparatively speaking, organised. Food and water supplies are adequate; medical and sanitary arrangements have been so far as possible provided. Cholera outbreaks have been stemmed by inoculation on a vast scale. Loudspeakers have been installed. Shelter of sort has been provided. Voluntary associations, headed by Lady Mountbatten, are doing splendid work, as are individual voluntary workers, including officers and other ranks of the two British battalions stationed in Delhi.

It is the policy to empty these camps as quickly as possible. Those who wish to stay in Delhi will be moved to their homes as soon as their security can be assured. But this is not yet. Those who wish to go to Pakistan will be moved there by train, but it has been necessary to suspend train movement until such time as security can be more positively assured. The wholesale slaughter of refugees, whether in trains or on the march, has been one of the most bestial features of the grisly Indian drama, and is apt more than anything else to lead to reprisals. To my certain knowledge every effort is being made by the Government of India, and, so far as I know, by the Government of Pakistan also, to put an end to these massacres. There have been no major incidents during the ten days before I left India.

14. The road movement of refugees from East to West Punjab and vice versa is an indescribable sight - miles and miles of humanity - some organised and with their poor possessions, others straggling and utterly destitute. In the history of the world, have there ever been two simultaneous mass migrations on this scale? Such protection as is possible is provided by troops; but obviously this can only be very limited. There has been a tendency on the part of Pakistan to put a

brake on the eastward movement of Sikh columns on the grounds that the westward movement of their own people - particularly through Amritsar - is being unnecessarily slow, and unjustifiably insecure. But generally speaking it is the desire of both Governments to get their own people into their own country as quickly as possible. Once this is done, there will be headaches enough in all conscience: but immense and tempting targets for revenge will at least have been removed.

15. The only bright spot in the last few weeks has been that up to the present the conflagration has been more or less confined to the Punjab and Delhi. The N.W.F.P. might easily have gone very wrong, but Mr. Jinnah assured me only three days ago that all was well, and that he was fairly confident that it would so continue.

16. In the United Provinces there are "bubbles" of disturbance, but on the whole things are fairly quiet. This may be due to the strong action taken by the Provincial Government as far back as early August, when they got wind of trouble, and jailed all the leaders before it started.

17. The remainder of the sub-Continent has not yet been materially affected, but it is far too early to have any confidence that this state of affairs will continue. The arrival of refugees in any place may at any time light the match: and, with the bulk of Indian troops and resources concentrated in the Punjab and in Delhi, there will not be much of a fire brigade to put out any new fire.

SECTION IV

18. After this brief survey of past events and present conditions, some questions may well be asked. And the first is: "How come the Government of India to be caught napping?" To this the only answer that I can suggest is that the Indian Intelligence organisation, like the rest of the administrative machine, had been running down for some time past. At the present moment it is practically non-existent: and this is one of the

main reasons for the inability of the Government of India, even at this late stage, to lay hands on the ringleaders who are keeping the pot a'boiling.

19. It must also be remembered that the Punjab had been under Section 93 for many months before the transfer of power, and that despite the Viceroy's efforts, it had been impossible to get out of it. Thus, when the time came, neither the East nor the West Punjab had any Government worthy of the name. The malefactors had a great opportunity - and they took it.

20. Then again it may be asked: "What is behind all this anarchy? Is it purely communal? or is there also a political objective?" As to this, there is a good deal to be said for the theory which Nehru propounded to me at some length four days ago. He explained that the Congress movement was opposed to violence, and wedded indissolubly to democratic principles. They desired a national, as opposed to a communal State. On the other hand, there were certain Hindu organisations, notably the Hindu Mahabha, and the Rashtrya Swayam Sevak Sangh, commonly known as the R.S.S.S., who were bitterly opposed to Congress on all three counts, and were intent on overthrowing the present Government. Nehru thought, quite mistakenly, that I knew all about the Hindu Mahabha, and dismissed it with the observation that they had declared the 15th August as a day of mourning. But he dilated at some length on the R.S.S.S. This was a movement of comparatively recent origin, and not as yet very strong in numbers. It was recruited from the lower middle classes, e.g. the junior clerks in Government offices, and had undoubtedly 'penetrated' those offices. Their policy was "India for the Hindus" and "Down with democratic principles". Their leader or leaders were little known. Up to the transfer of power, they had merely held secret meetings and parades, and had taken no active steps against the Government or anyone else. It was, however, fairly certain that they had, in combination with the Sikhs

(of whom more later) been directly responsible for organising the Delhi troubles. They were in fact exploiting and aggravating communal hatreds for political ends - namely the overthrow of the Congress Government. Nehru added that he was determined to lay them by the heels: but if Jinnah is at all correct in his views (see next paragraph), he will have his work cut out.

21. I might here inject Mr. Jinnah's views on the above. According to him this theory of Mr. Nehru's was an ingenious fiction designed to magnify the difficulties, and excuse the impotence of the Government of India, who had one aim and one aim only - the destruction of Pakistan. Nehru was a figurehead - vain, unbalanced, and impractical: the real and almost absolute power lay with Patel, who was closely mixed up with the R.S.S.S. and would never allow them to be suppressed. I believe Mr. Jinnah to be right.

22. There is such a general idea - which I myself entertain - that the Sikhs are at the root of the trouble, that it is worth recording the views of Mr. Nehru and Mr. Jinnah on this point. According to the former, the Sikhs were undoubtedly highly organised prior to the transfer of power, but that for the most part they were amenable to the leadership of Master Tara Singh and could be "called off" by him. Not so a couple of terrorist organisations, which numbered about 2 - 3,000 and were exceedingly well armed and drilled. They had had considerable help from Sikh rulers, and they had been directly responsible for planning and carrying out the Delhi disturbances. They were still very much in being, and would certainly not listen to Tara Singh or anyone else, except perhaps the Sikh supreme religious authorities.

23. Mr. Jinnah, on the other hand, has no doubt that the Government of India could, if Patel so minded, suppress the whole Sikh movement in a week, and that until this was done, there was no hope of peace. On the first point I do not agree: on the second I do agree. But

things have gone so far, and the Sikhs are now so strong and confident in themselves, that they must be dealt with by a combination of force of arms and diplomacy, and not by the former alone. There must be a carrot as well as the stick.

SECTION V

24. The fires of hatred and revenge will not die down for a generation or more. The best that can be hoped for on a short term view is an uneasy truce, which will almost certainly be disturbed by isolated incidents, riots due to famine and, above all, guerilla warfare on the Punjab boundary. This state of affairs can, however, be brought about only if all or most of the following conditions are fulfilled:-

- (i) The present Government of India, with Nehru at its head, remains in office. Nehru has, since the transfer of power, shown statesmanship of a high order, and moral and physical courage in a marked degree. He has lost a lot of ground recently owing to his non-communal outlook and his readiness to enforce unpopular measures.
- (ii) The Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan continue the practice of frequent meetings, conducted in a co-operative and frank spirit. Liaquat Ali Khan has proved to be the only man in the Pakistan Cabinet who has any degree of statesmanship, and is therefore subject to a good deal of criticism from his own side.
- (iii) The mass transfer of populations is successfully completed without any more major disasters.
- (iv) Thereafter minorities remaining in both Dominions are decently treated and safeguarded.
- (v) Both Governments deal effectively with the rehabilitation of their own refugees. Particularly is this the case with

the Sikhs, who have left the 'gardens' of the West Punjab for the smaller and less fertile areas of the East Punjab. If they are not contented in their new homes, they will turn either Delhi-wards or Lahore-wards - more probably the latter. In that event it would be the Greek guerilla game over again with India, backed by the Sikh States, playing Russia's part.

(vi) The armed forces of both Dominions obey the orders of their respective Governments.

(vii) The disturbances do not spread to those parts of India which are still unaffected.

25. The only alternative to a truce is ultimate chaos and anarchy throughout the North, and possibly throughout the whole, of the Sub-Continent.

5th October, 1947