

Telegram from Sir Terence Allen Shone on the situation in India (New Delhi, 10 September 1947)


Caption: On 10 September 1947, Sir Terence Allen Shone, High Commissioner of the United Kingdom to India, sends a telegram to Christopher Addison, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, in which he reports on the development of the situation in India and Pakistan after the partition of the British Indian Empire. He particularly refers to some press articles and mentions the communal trouble between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as well as the problem of refugees and population movements.

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Last updated: 01/03/2017



CONFIDENTIAL

BRITISH COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS
(INDIA)

September 10, 1947

Section 1

7075/7/68

Copy No. 09

INTERNAL SITUATION IN INDIA

*Sir T. Shone to Viscount Addison. (Received in Commonwealth Relations Office
10th September)*

(No. 97) *New Delhi,*
My Lord, *5th September, 1947*

In my despatch No. 94 of 30th August, I undertook to comment on certain extracts from two leading articles in the Independence Number of the *Eastern Economist*, dealing with the internal situation in India.

2. Few could disagree with the opinion there expressed that the maintenance—or perhaps one should rather say the re-establishment—of law and order is the first and most important task in India to-day. In the Punjab, where the appalling scale of the atrocities of the last three weeks—the full tale of which may never be told—has only lately come to be realised by public opinion from the reports of Ministers, press correspondents and the stories of refugees, such action is of immediate urgency, not least because of the danger that the stories put about by the many thousands of refugees from that distressful province may result in the spread of communal trouble to other parts of the two Dominions. It has already been necessary to impose a severe curfew in Delhi for some days on this account; and Mr. B. G. Kher, Prime Minister of Bombay, who has been in Delhi for the current meeting of the Constituent Assembly and came to luncheon with me a week ago, made no secret of his anxiety lest the Punjab situation might have unpleasant repercussions at any moment in Bombay. Since then, there have been isolated cases of stabbing in Bombay. It is fortunate, indeed, that the division of the Province of Bengal has not so far resulted, as many had feared it might, in a situation similar to that in the Punjab; but during the last few days Calcutta, which had been remarkably peaceful for a period of three weeks, has been the scene of renewed communal trouble.

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3. I have endeavoured to keep your Lordship's department informed by telegram, from day to day, of developments in connexion with the Punjab; and it will suffice to say here that all reports go to show that the murder, arson, looting and the flight of terror-stricken minorities from both portions of the newly-divided province have been more frightful than anything yet seen in this country. Despite the criticisms of foreign correspondents by Pandit Nehru on 28th August which were regarded as directed particularly at one of the B.B.C.'s observers, there now seems little doubt that his report and that, for instance, of the special correspondent of *The Times*, from Jullundur on 24th August (published in *The Times* on the following day), were correct in attributing a large part of the first major atrocities to organised bands of Sikhs, acting in retaliation for what the Muslims had done to the Sikhs in Rawalpindi last March. While there was undoubtedly serious trouble at an early stage in Lahore, it seems clear that the Sikh atrocities further inflamed the situation in the West Punjab. The stories of attacks on trains, in both portions of the Punjab, accompanied by the butchery of passengers and wholesale looting, are innumerable; and there seems to be no doubt that in many places where hapless minorities were slaughtered and their houses burned, the police and the military not only took no steps to stop the slaughter and arson, but connived at, and in some instances participated in, the proceedings. The Punjab Boundary Force has come in for much criticism in the press and even in the utterances of political leaders; but it is plain that the force was faced, at an early stage, with conditions for which it was quite inadequate and there can be no doubt that, but for its efforts, things would have been far worse. In the

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result, it may be said that the frontier between West and East Punjab is being largely determined by massacre and mass emigration of the survivors. Despite the appalling problems created by this emigration and the reluctance of the Government of India, at least, to contemplate any large scale exchange of population, the leaders of India and Pakistan have now agreed together that the evacuation of all who desire to leave either of the Punjab provinces for the other must be organised with all speed by the military, who are now under separate command in each province.

4. The political leaders of India and Pakistan appear to be fully seized of the urgency of dealing with this situation and it is only to be hoped that their efforts will succeed, and succeed in time. Otherwise, the chances of conserving conditions in other parts of the country conducive to the maintenance or restoration of law and order will be gravely imperilled.

5. It is undeniable that much remains to be done in this respect in many other parts of the country, not merely in the way, for instance, of curbing the activities of bandits, volunteer armies, &c., but also of inculcating in the minds of people who have for so long been educated, not least by the Congress Party itself, in a school of disrespect for, and disobedience to, authority, that, however paying such an attitude may have been in order to get rid of foreign rule, it is incompatible with the maintenance of peace and security, let alone orderly development and progress under the national leadership which has now been attained. Many Indians are fully alive to this necessity, to which I first referred in paragraph 16 of my despatch No. 20 of 3rd March last, and the following extract from an article in the *Hindustan Times* of 31st August, entitled "Glimpse of Anarchy," by Mr. K. Santhanam—a writer whom I have had occasion to quote in more than one despatch on internal affairs—contains some cogent observations in this connexion:—

"It is essential that the whole country should learn the lessons of the disaster that has overtaken the two new States of India and Pakistan. In our resistance to foreign rule, we had necessarily to discount the value of maintenance of law and order. We used to call the police an instrument of oppression, and any official who moved swiftly and decisively against disturbers of public peace became unpopular. We have now to effect a complete change in this attitude. Unless our provincial Ministries, aided, if necessary, by the Central Government,

are able and resolved to maintain peace and secure the safety and freedom of the individual, there can be no progress of any kind. This truth has to be brought home to the people in as many ways as possible. The individual who takes the law into his own hands, even for a just cause, must be treated as a public enemy. Organisations which presume to take upon themselves the functions of the police and magistracy are instruments of anarchy and must be put down without any hesitation. Means must be devised to enlist responsible citizens for the assistance of the authorities in times of tension and trouble. Officials who act quickly and decisively should be encouraged, while those who drift and shirk responsibility must be dismissed without much ado about their future careers or the fate of their families. Above all, the Ministries must undertake intensive popular education regarding the intimate relation between the maintenance of law and order and the working of democratic institutions. Popular sympathy with those who resist authority and break the law has become almost habitual and there are many individuals and groups who are ready to exploit this hang-over of the national struggle. It is not enough to put law-breakers in jail. Law-breaking must cease to be popular. The people must be made to realise that any movement of civil resistance in a democratic system is an attempt of the minority to coerce the majority and if it succeeds it will undermine democracy and pave the way for dictatorship. The creation of an intense and instinctive popular aversion to all unconstitutional and illegal action is an essential preliminary to the foundation of a stable democratic State in India."

6. This process of education cannot be accomplished without great effort and drastic measures and it is bound to take time; in so far as the more immediate problems of law and order are concerned, it must be borne in mind that the police in many parts of the country have been under a great strain for a long time past. Moreover, the armed forces, on whom it is ultimately necessary to rely in such situations as have arisen in the Punjab, have been greatly reduced in numbers. If, as seems only too probable, from recent reports, both the police and the armed forces are in danger of becoming infected, if indeed they are not so already, by the communal virus, the questions inevitably arise how far mixed formations of Hindus,

Muslims and Sikhs, can be expected to maintain discipline in circumstances where communal passions are aroused to frenzy, and to what extent the police and the armed forces in either Dominion—even if and when they no longer contain minority elements—can be relied on to act impartially in such emergencies.

7. Mr. Sauthanam—by no means always a prophet of woe—fears that “the relations of India and Pakistan will continue to be coloured for many years by the tragic events in the Punjab. The hopes of active friendship, which many entertained when a satisfactory agreement about the division of the country and the delimitation of the boundaries of the Punjab and Bengal was reached, have to be given up. The best that can now be hoped for is that those in power on both sides will seek to avoid any action calculated to lead to conflict.” He goes on to argue that India cannot afford to take any chances, that special border forces should be created to guard her frontiers and that India's economy must be rapidly reorganised on the basis that a free exchange of resources between India and Pakistan will not be easily available. This may be too pessimistic an outlook, provided the situation in the Punjab can be stabilised within a reasonable time and communal troubles on any considerable scale can be avoided in other parts of the two Dominions. But it is as yet far from certain that this can be achieved.

8. I will turn now to some of the other matters referred to in my despatch No. 94. The *Eastern Economist* rightly draws attention to the decline in standards of administration. This, as I have reported in various despatches and letters during the last nine months, has been a cause of growing concern, not least to the British communities in India. Both Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai—who has been conducting an enquiry into the present state of the Indian Civil Service—and Pandit Nehru himself have deplored to me the dearth of competent officials, both at the centre and in the provinces. I understand that the number of such senior officials has fallen from over 1,000 before the war to about 400. It will take a long time to train men up to the requisite standards not only for the Home Departments, but also for the embassies and legations which India is setting up abroad. Sir Girja told me that there were no sources ready to hand on which to draw for trained men, and he went on to say, in strict confidence, that the only practical solution he saw was to invite some of the British officials to return, but

this was not possible politically. Newspapers like the *Hindustan Times* may take pride in the thought that there are now no British officials left, for instance, in the External Affairs Department; but there can be no doubt that the concessions made in this respect to nationalist sentiment, both at the centre and in the provinces, coupled with the division of the civil service between India and Pakistan, have set the Dominion of India a grave problem. It may well be that the Government of Pakistan have been wiser, in their generation, in retaining the services of so many British officials.

9. As the *Eastern Economist* points out, the future of the Congress Party itself is also a matter of uncertainty. There has been a school of thought here which has taken the line that, once independence were achieved, the party would have performed its main function and would disintegrate. There is certainly a world of difference between its Right wing under Sardar Patel, with the backing of big business, and its Left, under Jai Prakash Narain—now called the Socialist Party, without the inclusion of “Congress” in its title. Will it hold together? If not, will the Right wing or the Left prevail? And if there is an open breach between the two, which way will Pandit Nehru go? In present circumstances, a period of strong Government seems essential; will it be in India's best interest that this should be a solid Government of one party, or will a healthy Opposition be a useful factor? If so, are there signs of such a healthy Opposition and of what would it consist? These are questions which it would be rash to attempt to answer now; perhaps the forthcoming meeting of the All India Congress Committee in Bombay, later this month, will give some indication of future tendencies.

10. The *Eastern Economist* articles make no reference to a factor which, as I have reported in various despatches and letters to the India Office, seems to me disturbing in present conditions. Where are the potential political leaders of the future? Many of the more eminent leaders and those who are now in office are elderly for such posts, at all events by Indian standards—Gandhi 78, Patel 73, Prasad 62, Rajagopalachari and Mrs. Naidu 68–70; Maulana Azad is said to be 59 but looks and seems older; Nehru is 58. Most of those in office are overworked—even apart from the special exigencies of the last few months and the spate of problems now before them—and many are tired men.

The average age of members of the Constituent Assembly—now the legislative body—is high. When one asks where are the younger men, the usual reply is that they are in the Socialist or Communist Parties. The division of the country into India and Pakistan and the necessity for filling a number of posts in the Indian Cabinet might well have been the occasion for infusing some youthful blood into the veins of Government in Delhi and for saddling some of the younger and wiser political war-horses with the responsibilities of office. I have heard that the Socialists refused to take office unless they were given several of the key Ministries—a demand to which the Congress leaders were not prepared to yield. In the result, while some of the new Ministers are men of unquestionable ability, all are middle-aged and the opportunity for bringing in some of the younger men, for training in the task of Government rather than the incitement of strikes and discontent, seems to have been lost, for the time being at all events.

11. The new Dominion Cabinet, whose names and offices were given in my despatch No. 86 of 18th August, is composed of 8 Congressmen (including 2 Muslims, 1 Indian Christian and 1 Scheduled Castes representative); 1 Sikh (Sardar Baldev Singh, Minister of Defence); 1 non-Congress representative of the Scheduled Castes (Dr. Ambedkar); 1 member of the Hindu Mahasabha (Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerji); and 3 Independents (including 1 Indian Christian and 1 Parsee).

12. The Socialists, who have been threatening to cut adrift altogether from the Congress Party if it failed to pursue an out and out Socialist policy, have been less vocal of late. They appear, generally speaking, to be waiting on events; but I have just heard—though I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the report—that the Government of Bihar has been taking measures against some members of the Socialist Party in that province. The Hindu Mahasabha, on the other hand, have been active in the United Provinces to a degree which led the Government to incarcerate a number of its leaders. I have learned, on what I believe to be good authority, that Sardar Patel, the Home Minister, when informed that a Mahasabha leader was about to make trouble in Delhi, at once picked up the telephone and told Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerji in no uncertain terms that it was up to him, as a member of the Government, to deal with the situation. The Working Committee of the Forward Bloc (which advocated revolu-

tionary methods) has decided to form a new party with the Socialist Republican Party, following the ideology and programme of the late Subhas Chandra Bose. I have no recent information regarding the activities of the Communists; and as I have indicated above, it is too early to attempt any forecast of the shape of political things to come.

13. Meanwhile the Constituent Assembly has been pursuing its labours during the past fortnight mainly in connexion with the powers of the Central Government under the new Constitution and the question of minorities; and although its president, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, is credited with a desire for more speed, it would seem to be making commendable progress, having regard to all the circumstances. Dr. Prasad told me, when he came to luncheon recently, that the next meeting would be for the purpose of discussing the draft of the new Constitution (which is now being prepared by Sir B. N. Rau). I have arranged for members of my staff to keep in touch with the secretariat of the Assembly, and also with the States Department, with a view to obtaining up-to-date information regarding their respective activities.

14. It would overburden this despatch if I were to attempt to comment on the economic matters mentioned in the *Eastern Economist* articles cited in my despatch No. 94. According to an obviously inspired statement published in the press on 30th August, the Government of India is considering measures to meet "the economic crisis" which faces the country, and is expected to announce its policy early this month. There is said to be increasing realisation in Government circles that India faces as serious a situation as that in Great Britain. I enclose^(*) a copy of this statement, analysing the factors which have contributed to this situation and forecasting the early establishment of a planning commission, possibly under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister.

15. One last word. It might well seem natural to expect that with so many and complex problems to tackle at home, the Government of India will not seek to play a leading rôle in the international field. I do not believe this will be so, unless conditions in India so deteriorate as to compel them to concentrate all their efforts on internal affairs. I think Sir Girja Bajpai made an accurate forecast when he told me, as reported in my telegram No. I.R.K.U 547 of 30th July, that the Government were likely to succeed or fail according to the extent to which they gave effect to the

(*) Not printed.

popular demands which there would be for India to play her part in the international field and for economic rehabilitation in India itself. I have no doubt in my mind that Pandit Nehru, at all events, is determined that India shall take, without delay, what he would regard as her rightful place in international affairs. She may at times act hastily, emotionally, ill-advisedly—but act I am sure she will. And if domestic problems prove difficult of solution, as they surely must, there is always the hope that some move abroad may divert the popular imagination as success. As regards the aims which India is likely to pursue in the field of foreign affairs, the article on "India's Foreign Policy" in the *Eastern Economist*, enclosed in my despatch No. 94, seems to provide some useful pointers. They are there summarised as follows—

- (1) the preservation of world peace and the avoidance of war;
- (2) the protection of the "just rights" of Indian nationals abroad;

- (3) general support to dependent peoples, particularly those of Asia, who are striving for freedom and the prevention of foreign Powers from having armies on Asian soil;
- (4) whole-hearted co-operation with the United Nations;
- (5) an endeavour "as soon as circumstances are favourable" to secure revision of the Charter of the United Nations in certain respects, notably the modification of the Great Powers' veto;
- (6) the formation of a regional organisation for South-Eastern Asia, including Pakistan, India, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya and possibly Vietnam and Indonesia, "correlated in its activity to the United Nations."

10. I am sending a copy of this despatch to the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan.

I have, &c.

TERENCE SHONE.