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W.M.(43)61st CONCLUSIONS

Confidential Annex

(29th April, 1943 - 12 noon)

FAR EAST
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Military
Situation.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the three Commanders-in-Chief had been summoned home for consultation, and he thought the War Cabinet would be interested to hear their views on the situation in Burma and the Indian Ocean.

Operations in Arakan had been very disappointing, and the general conditions of warfare in Burma favoured the Japanese. The mountainous jungle country forbade the use of modern weapons, and hampered the operations of aircraft. Communications were few and difficult, malaria was prevalent, and the morale of our troops was reported to be less high than it should be. At Casablanca we had agreed - largely as a concession to United States opinion - to mount a full-scale operation for the re-capture of Burma between the monsoons of 1943 and 1944. Since then, the demands made on shipping by HUSKY, and other commitments, had increased, and we had not been able to provide the shipping required to carry to the Indian Ocean the requirements of the Burma operation. We should probably have to relinquish the idea of reconquering Burma during the coming winter. Alternatives were being studied by the Chiefs of Staff in consultation with the Commanders-in-Chief.

In the meanwhile, an invitation had been received from the United States Chiefs of Staff for the three Commanders-in-Chief to return to India via Washington, where they would meet General Stilwell and General Chennault, who had been summoned there. It was open to doubt whether this invitation should be accepted, in view of the natural urge which existed in America to devote resources to the war against Japan. He (the Prime Minister) would much rather that the United States Chiefs of Staff should come to London. On the other hand, if the invitation were rejected, and things did not go well, it would afford a pretext to the Americans for saying that we had neglected an opportunity for making a combined plan. The matter would have to be carefully considered.

The Prime Minister then asked the Commanders-in-Chief to give their views on the situation.

SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL said that the situation in Burma was entirely governed by communications. These were bad, not only in Burma, but in North East India, where the River Brahmaputra (over which there was no bridge) prevented through road or rail communication. There was only a single track metre-gauge railway in Assam, which in peacetime took two or three trains a day. This had now been worked up to its maximum capacity, and river transport had also been developed, though the latter was hampered by the dispatch of river craft to Iraq earlier in the war. The result was some congestion in North East India, where both American and British airfields were being developed on a large scale, for which purpose a great deal of material had to be brought in. This competed with the development of

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the communications themselves. Until a year ago, there was no road between India and Burma. Now there was 260 miles of difficult road from the railhead at Manipur to the Chindwin Valley. Two roads were being made, one forward from Imphal, and one from Ledo to Myitkyina. The whole country was covered with jungle, and the malaria was very severe.

After the Casablanca Conference, instructions had been received for a full-scale invasion of Burma in the winter of 1943/44 to be prepared. In consultation with the Americans, a plan had therefore been made for an advance by a British Corps from Manipur and a Chinese Corps from Ledo, with the object of joining hands with the Chinese Army advancing from Yunnan. This advance would be carried to Mandalay. Meanwhile, landings would be made at various points in lower Burma, and a direct assault would be made on Rangoon. This plan was to be put into effect in November, in the hopes that it would permit the reduction of the country before the onset of the ensuing monsoon. He had always regarded the operation as difficult and attended with considerable hazards. The assault on Rangoon, which was essential to success, meant a landing right up the river which was the only way in. Nevertheless, no other plan could be found, and provided everything went well, and all preparations were completed to time, he thought that the plan, though hazardous, might succeed. It required the shipment of 180,000 tons to the Indian Ocean every month from March 1943. During March and April, however, only 60/70,000 tons a month had actually been shipped. This meant inevitably the postponement of the operation, which in its turn meant that it had little or no chance of being carried through in the time available.

The operations which had been taking place in Arakan had as their object the capture of Akyab. If enough assault shipping had been available, a direct attack on Akyab would have been made, but without the shipping there was no way of doing the operation except by a land advance down the Mayu Peninsula. Arakan was the worst part of Burma in which to operate, and could never be a route for invasion. The operations had shown up certain weaknesses in training and leadership of our troops, and had given us a good insight into the Japanese tactics, which were undoubtedly skilful. Considerable loss had also been caused to the enemy. It was hoped to profit by what had occurred. At the same time as the Arakan operations, a specially trained and organised Brigade had moved across the Chindwin to cut the railway between Wundwin and Myitkyina. This had been done successfully, and the Brigade had then crossed the Irrawaddy with a view to raiding the Japanese. Unfortunately, most of the mules with the Brigade had died of anthrax, so that it had been necessary to withdraw in small columns, some of which had got back, and some were still out. The object had been to gain experience of such operations, and although it had originally been intended to carry them out in conjunction with an advance by the Chinese from Yunnan which had not materialised, they had, he thought, been valuable.

The monsoon would be breaking in two or three weeks' time, and as far as possible troops would be withdrawn from the unhealthy regions. Two Divisions, which would form the holding force during the monsoon, would not be fit for operations next winter. Various alternatives to a full-scale invasion of Burma had been considered, one of which was to advance into Northern Burma, and to try to occupy as far South as Mandalay and the dry belt. The difficulty about this was that communications through to Mandalay could not be established within the time available. On the whole, therefore, it seemed better to restrict our operations

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next winter to something more limited, and to concentrate on the build-up of airfields and the air route to China.

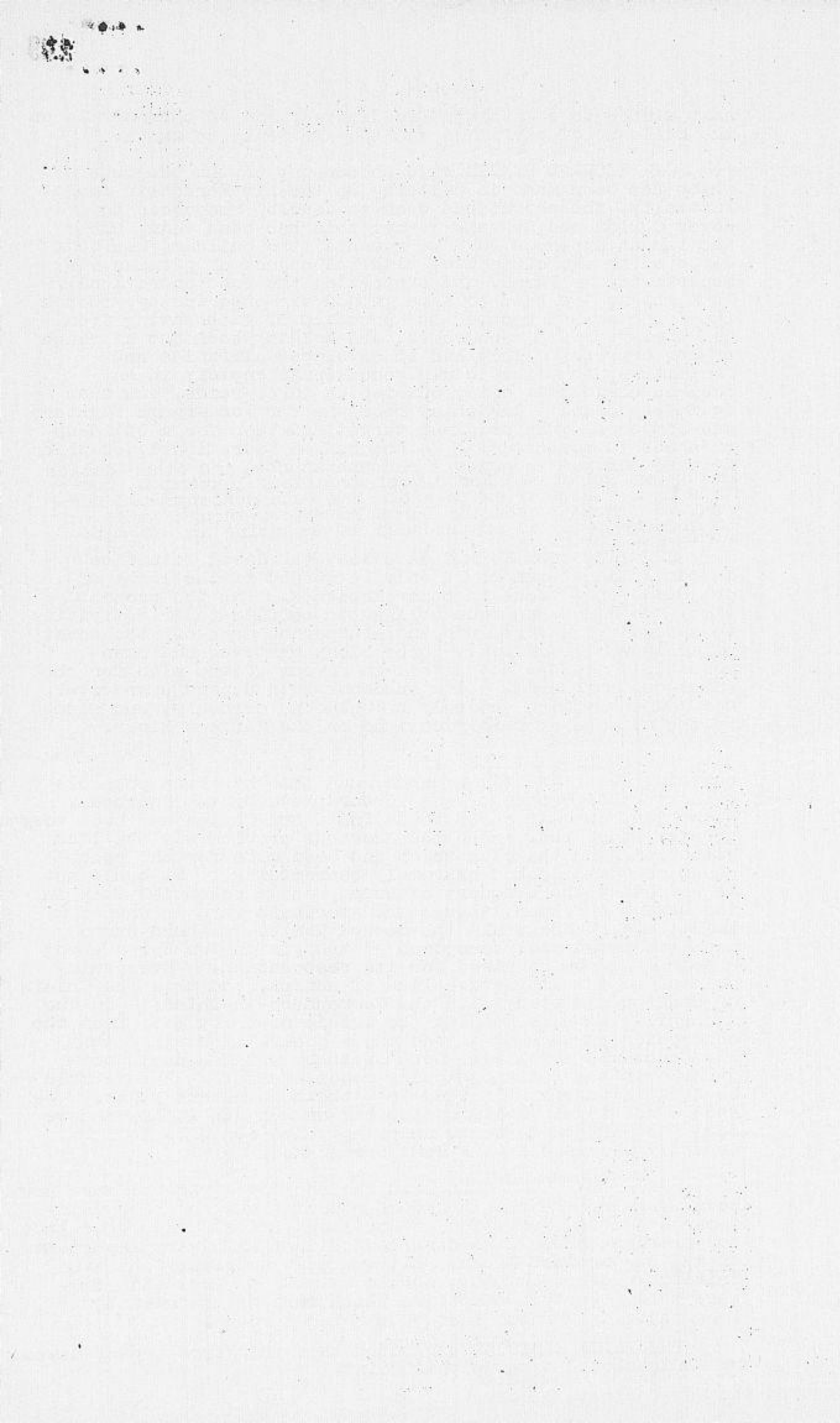
SIR RICHARD PEIRSE gave an account of the progress which had been made in building up the Air Forces in India. Initially, the object had been to develop resources to cover Ceylon and Bengal. When this had been done, and the threat appeared to have receded, the build-up had been directed to the offensive, with the object of gaining air superiority in Burma, and supporting the land operations. We might now be said to have gained air superiority, though the Japanese had adopted the practice of withdrawing from all their forward aerodromes, and holding back out of reach of our bombers. They had so developed airfields and facilities, that they could concentrate rapidly in any desired direction, carry out two or three raids, and then again withdraw. Our chief need was for long-range fighters and bombers. The original target had been for a build-up of about 70 Squadrons. We now had 46 Operational, of which 24 were engaged in general reconnaissance, and other duties in Ceylon and on the North West Frontier, leaving 22 for fighting. As many as possible had been concentrated forward on aerodromes on the Burma frontier, though some difficulty had been experienced in arranging an adequate warning system.

SIR JAMES SOMERVILLE said that the Naval situation in the Indian Ocean could only be judged in the light of projected operations in other theatres. At the present time, the Fleet had been obliged to confine their activities to escorting convoys, and anti-submarine work off the coast of Africa. No offensive operations whatever had been possible. He was not at all in favour of the plan for the reconquest of Burma. Its success would depend upon cover for landings given entirely by seaborne aircraft, and also on the absence of fortifications on the Rangoon River.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Eastern Fleet had certainly been greatly reduced, and this had been possible owing to the absence of any forward move by the Japanese. Meanwhile, our Air strength in India and Ceylon had been very greatly increased. The most serious problem was the land situation, and the plan which had been made for the reconquest of Burma looked extremely unpromising. It could not be said that the conquest of Burma was an essential step in the defeat of Japan, though the Americans were in favour of the attempt. Nor would the occupation of Northern Burma mean the immediate resumption of traffic on the Burma Road; a year would be required for its restoration. Everything pointed to an alternative line of action, and this the Chiefs of Staff would study with the Commanders-in-Chief. In the meanwhile, we must not let the Americans drift away from the conception of Germany as the major enemy. He hoped that Sir Archibald Wavell and Lord Leathers would consult together over the Indian shipping requirements. These should be scrutinized, and divided into their component parts. We should not try to build up too big an Army in India, and we could not afford to waste shipping which would be so urgently required in the Mediterranean.

SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL said that no new Divisions were now being formed, and the intake of recruits was only for maintenance and the formation of ancillary units. He hoped that our propaganda would be directed to instilling the importance of the war against Japan. It was most necessary that the British soldiers in India should be made to feel that they were taking part in campaigns which were of the utmost importance, and which must be carried through.

THE PRIME MINISTER suggested that the Secretary of State for India should take up this point.





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