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FROM : USLO, Khartoum

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DESP. NO.

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON.

March 8, 1954
DATE

REF : Khartoum Telegrams 44 and 45 of March 1, 1954

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SUBJECT: The Khartoum Riot of March 1, 1954

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E.O. 12856, Sec. 3.3

NND 882900

BY *VH*, NARA, Date *9-19-96*

SUMMARY

A clash occurred between the pro-independence Ansar followers of Sayed Abdul Rahman el Mahdi (SAR) and the police in Khartoum on March 1st which led to the death of 34 and the wounding of over 200. This is the most serious disturbance of the peace in the Sudan since the Mahdiya. The Ansars came to demonstrate against Neguib and Egyptian influence and in favor of Sudanese independence. They were requested to disperse and when they refused to do so an altercation with the police followed which developed into a riot. The British administration blames the Egyptian Government for pushing too fast in the Sudan and considers Neguib's visit as the immediate cause. Egyptian officials in the Sudan, and Neguib himself, blame the British administration for plotting the whole thing. The pro-independence Umma Party disclaimed responsibility for the action of the Ansar and blames the NUP Government for provoking trouble. The NUP Government blames the Umma opposition and claims the disturbance was deliberate, it also blames the British administration for not following the precautionary order of the Government. A great many people in Khartoum are displaying wisdom after the event. Although many people recognized the tension that always stems from huge crowds in this area no one foresaw this tragedy. An official inquiry is to be conducted.

Pending the results of this investigation it appears, on the basis of what is known now, that: inadequate public security precautions were taken; the visit of Neguib following his fall and return to power caused intense emotional feelings; armed Ansars came into Khartoum on the orders of their leaders in defiance of a ban issued by the Minister of Interior; and a spontaneous riot with roots deep in sectarian animosities took place. Only SAR himself, or his son Sayed SIDDIK, who was present at the scene, could have stopped the riot and neither of them tried. Calm now prevails in Khartoum and throughout the country, although the trouble was confined to Khartoum, but further violence could be started by intemperate action on the part of the British administration, Egyptian officials, the Government or the Opposition. An order for the arrest of Siddik which some Government members and the police want, would be likely to provoke an Ansar uprising. Siddik has a responsibility for the Ansar under his father, SAR, and was present on the scene of the riots, some observers claim he incited the Ansar to attack the police; he is also president of the Umma Party. If the Government goes through with its plan to dissolve the Ansar this may lead to violence.

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If the present calm continues then the importance of this riot should not be exaggerated and it may be possible to see it in perspective as an unfortunate incident, but not, by any means, as proof that the Sudanese are incapable of governing themselves. Even with continued calm, however, this incident will undoubtedly deepen the bitterness between the National Unionist Party and the Umma. The old fears of a Mahdist revival have become very real. Some of the British administrators feel that this riot is evidence that they should not leave hastily, as they had more or less decided, and they have been putting this line to Selwyn LLOYD, the Minister of State, and, they report, with some success, although no decision has been taken. This is not what Selwyn Lloyd told me as he gave me to understand he wants the British to leave as soon as possible, consistent with Britain's responsibilities. British administrators will undoubtedly attempt to make political capital out of this incident and there is some danger that they may overplay their hand. Tension between the Government and the Opposition is almost inevitable over the steps that are subsequently taken to punish those responsible for this riot. Some sort of crisis within the NUP Government is foreseen by some observers because of the allegation that the Prime Minister is too busy to discharge the added responsibilities of the Ministry of the Interior (the department responsible for public security), and it may prove difficult to agree on a candidate acceptable to all factions within the NUP. NUP leaders insist that no such crisis will arise.

On the basis of all the information now available and talks with leaders of all segments of opinion an attempt follows to state: (1) what happened; (2) who was responsible; and (3) what is the political significance of this riot?

I. What Happened?

All Khartoum looked forward to March 1st as an occasion on which the Sudanese themselves would conduct ceremonies marking the opening of this session of parliament. A great many guests had been invited, mostly from the Arab world. The United States designated Ambassador Jefferson PATTERSON as its official representative and he and Mrs. Patterson arrived on February 27th. The Cabinet was practically exhausted from last minute preparations and the late completion of the statement of Government policy to be ready by the Governor General. Excitement was aroused by the news that General Neguib, whose fall from power had been a major disappointment to NUP leaders, had not only been reinstated but would follow through with his plans to attend the opening ceremony of parliament. Large numbers of Sudanese converged on Khartoum. Among them were thousands of Ansars, a group often referred to as a youth group, although many of the members are older men, who are the followers of SAR and form the backbone of the Umma Party. The Ansars are no undisciplined mob, but are a well organized movement with a director, lieutenants and group leaders for every thirty or forty members. They obey SAR without hesitation as they consider him a deity.

On the morning of March 1st a throng variously estimated at between 30 and 50 thousand, a huge one by Sudanese standards, gathered at Khartoum airport to welcome General Neguib. There were anti-Neguib elements in this throng but it was predominantly pro-Neguib. Along the usual route from the airport to the Governor General's palace, where Neguib was to stay, crowds lined the way and

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they were predominantly Ansars. Officials disagree on the number of Ansars but say not less than 6 and not more than 20 thousand were present in Khartoum. It is believed that some 60 or 80 thousand intended to come to Khartoum, on instructions from their leaders, to attend an Ansar congress and take part in the ceremonies for the opening of parliament, but could not get here because of transportation difficulties and an order from the Minister of the Interior banning "travellers in big numbers by trains, trucks and lorries from entry with effect from 1600 hours on Thursday 25th February up to the morning of Monday March 8th" from coming to Khartoum because the city had become "too crowded to allow health and supplies arrangements to be carried out smoothly."

When General Neguib arrived at Khartoum airport at 10 a.m. the inadequate police guard could not handle the crowd which broke through the cordon and surged onto the air strip. NUP supporters lifted Neguib on their shoulders and he could not inspect the guard of honor. The Kaid, Major General R. SCOONES, the Commander of the Sudan Defense Force (SDF), seeing that the Governor General could not make his way to greet Neguib and aware of the general confusion, ordered a contingent of the SDF to clear a space which they did with rifle butts. Neguib then partly inspected the guard of honor and got into the Governor General's red Rolls Royce. Because the crowd had already gotten out of control once and he still had to pass through the Ansars, the Governor General, mindful of his responsibility for Neguib's personal safety, ordered his car not to go along the agreed route, but to take a less congested route to the Palace. This undoubtedly disappointed the Ansar and some observers claim it contributed to the disturbance.

At the Palace a huge crowd of NUP supporters and some Khatmia youth, members of the sect led by Sayed Ali el Mirghani (SAM) which supports the NUP, staged a demonstration and shouted, "Long live Neguib!" Some of them climbed the wall surrounding the Palace, but were put out and this crowd was dispersed by the police. While this demonstration was at its height Neguib reportedly came out on the front balcony of the Palace and acknowledged the homage being paid him.

When the Khatmia youth had been dispersed the Ansars, who had been patiently standing along the regular route from the airport to the Palace to shout their slogans, learned that Neguib was already in the Palace. Up to this point they had marched from place to place with discipline, indeed they had spent a great part of two days marching, but on hearing that Neguib was in the Palace they rushed toward it.

The Ansar could not get in the Palace. They shouted their cries of, "No Egyptians and no British, but an independent Sudan!" The police who were armed only with clubs ordered them to disperse. The Ansars pressed against one of the main gates and a scuffle took place in which Mustafa el Mahdi, Superintendent of Police for Khartoum Province, was killed. He was the only senior officer of Ansar sympathies in the police force. He was a nephew of SAR's. His own people killed him in a demonstration of how senseless this riot was. The Ansar then milled around in the square in front of the Civil Secretariat which adjoins the Palace. More stabbings took place. Tear gas bombs were brought out. Unfortunately a fairly strong wind lessened the effectiveness of the tear gas. Some Ansar sympathizers claim that the Ansar as simple tribesmen did not know what

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gas was and thought the tear gas bombs were real bombs--since many of them thought they would be killed anyway they charged the police with their heavy sticks and the knives they always carry on their arms. A few had spears to hold up the Mahdist banners which they carried and they used these spears.

When Hugh McGUIGAN, the Commandant of Police for Khartoum who was in a lorry in the midst of the crowd trying to get them to disperse was killed, the SDF opened fire. McGuigan was stabbed over twenty times and his body was kicked about. The SDF had been summoned before his death, but it is generally believed that they opened fire when he was killed, although this was apparently coincidental. The situation was perilously close to being out of hand when the SDF opened fire, but they eventually dispersed the Ansars. Officials feared the Ansar might return to take revenge for their dead.

As soon as the altercation started in earnest W.H.T. LUCE, the Governor General's Advisor on Constitutional and External Affairs, was despatched to SAR to get him to call off his followers. When Luce went he did not know McGuigan had fallen, but only that several police and Ansar had been killed and the fighting was continuing. SAR ranted against the Egyptians and claimed that he could no longer stand their interference. He claimed not to recognize the present NUP Government which he termed "the tail of the Egyptian dog," and talked about a possible civil war with the implication that this might be the time to start. As he received word of Ansar losses he became even angrier. Luce, a calm and well-controlled man, had it hot and heavy with SAR and wound up by saying that if he did not call off his followers the British would hold him personally responsible. After some further argument SAR finally agreed to get his men out of Khartoum.

Meanwhile the Governor General, master-minded in part by Selwyn Lloyd, the Minister of State, moved quickly and issued a proclamation of emergency in the Province of Khartoum. He told the Prime Minister that he felt it necessary for him to take over and if the Prime Minister objected he would declare a constitutional breakdown which would give him the authority to take over. The Prime Minister assented--from all reports, the Prime Minister was a badly frightened man at this point. Upon the proclamation of emergency in Khartoum the Governor General possessed executive power in consultation with the Council of Ministers, meaning in practical terms that the Prime Minister would approve any necessary action. The Sudan Defense Force was made responsible for maintaining order and received extraordinary powers to do so, such as the right to arrest without a warrant. The opening of Parliament was postponed until March 10th and all ceremonies were cancelled. The Governor General felt that with the possibility of further disorder it would be unwise to take the risk of going on with the opening of parliament and the attendant ceremonies. The Governor of Khartoum Province issued an order banning all public gatherings until further notice. The Council of Ministers issued a statement expressing regret over what had transpired and cancelled the entire program for guests and visitors connected with what was to have been the opening of parliament. Indicating there were "reasons to believe that this was a prearranged matter," although it did not disclose these reasons, The Council of Ministers further declared that an exhaustive investigation would be carried out and all citizens were urged to give helpful information to the police.

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Umma Party leaders issued a statement disclaiming responsibility for the disturbances and Sayed Siddik also made a public statement alleging that his unarmed followers were provoked by rough handling on the part of the police. Many eye witnesses among the British civil servants who saw the incident from their offices in the Civil Secretariat report that the police, who are predominantly Khatmia, were rough on the Ansar. No one, however, has accused them of being so rough as to warrant stabbing in return. A three-man committee of inquiry, made up of one British official and two Sudanese was appointed to carry out the investigation.

The disturbances were limited to the Khartoum area and the Governors of all the Provinces have reported all calm in their areas. The Khartoum clash was between the Ansar and the police with the SDF intervening decisively. No instance of Ansar vs. Khatmia fighting occurred. No shops were looted, no residences were damaged, and no Europeans, except for Commandant McGuigan, were harmed. The Ansars left Khartoum in railroad trains specially provided by the Government, and apart from a few minor incidents calm prevailed with the departure of the main body of the Ansars. Although this calm still prevails there is an uneasy feeling and some apprehension on the part of many British administrators that there may be further trouble. The Sudanese leaders of both sides believe the trouble is over unless one or the other side provokes trouble. The state of emergency in Khartoum Province is still in effect.

II. Who Was Responsible?

No proven attribution of responsibility for the unfortunate Khartoum riot can be made until the commission of inquiry has conducted its inquiry and revealed its findings. However, on the basis of the information now known, certain areas of responsibility may be indicated.

1. Inadequate precautions were taken to maintain public security.

Two factors are involved in this charge. Did the Council of Ministers issue the necessary orders, and were the orders given carried out? The Council of Ministers has stated publicly that: (a) the Minister of the Interior issued a ban on large groups coming into Khartoum; (b) the Minister of the Interior issued a subsequent order banning the influx of formations into Khartoum; (c) the Council of Ministers ordered that crowds be dispersed of all types of weapons; (d) the Council of Ministers decided that a ruling by the Governor of Khartoum banning processions should be carried out; and (e) at a special meeting of the Council of Ministers and the civil servants responsible for public security certain measures were agreed upon. It appears that the orders given were adequate. It does not appear that these orders were carried out. If this is proven to be the case then the Government will place a large portion of the blame on the Permanent Under-Secretary for the Interior, A.C. BEATON, and will undoubtedly imply that the British administration wanted trouble.

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4. The Ansars ~~constituted the law~~ coming into Khartoum in such numbers and by possessing weapons.

The Ansar move only under orders. Their leaders gave them orders to come into Khartoum. The NUP has uncovered a letter allegedly sent by Abdullah NOGDULLA, the leader of the Ansars directing a supporter in Shendi to come to Khartoum and to come prepared. The Ansar leaders knew their men should not be armed. When the fighting actually took place it is alleged that the Ansar were urged by such leaders as Siddik, Mohammed Khallifa Sherif and Abdullah Nogdulla to go after the police. If the Ansar had not been in Khartoum there would have been no trouble.

3. Egyptian policy and particularly the visit of Neguib at this time caused tension that resulted in violence.

The Egyptian Government has pushed its advantage in the Sudan and has made extravagant claims of criticism of the British administration. This undoubtedly contributed to a heightening of political tension made even more dangerous by the fact that the Egyptians and NUP Government and party have been identified as one force. Neguib's visit after his dramatic fall and rein-statement certainly created unusual excitement and intensified the partisanship of the crowds assembled for the opening of parliament. The rupture between the Egyptian Government and the Umma Party as well as SAR had been steadily widening. Neguib's visit was undoubtedly calculated to gain support for unity with Egypt because of his popularity in the Sudan. (Neguib reportedly told the Governor General that he had not particularly wanted to make the trip to the Sudan at this time after what had transpired in Egypt but did so at the urging of the RCC).

4. The role of the British Administration.

Egyptians have charged and some NUP have implied that the British administration plotted this disturbance. There is no evidence to substantiate this charge so far as USLO knows. The British administration was not adverse to SAR making a demonstration against Egyptian influence in the Sudan and in favor of independence. It may be that the general lines of the demonstration might have been discussed by British administrative officials and SAR, but that they deliberately connived at the event that transpired seems a flagrantly unfair charge to the reporting officer. It is a fact that the British administration was not enthusiastic about the opening of parliament ceremonies. It is also obvious that the British administration has been counting on the Egyptians to overplay their hand. It must also be borne in mind that the British administration is the only body with experience with large crowds in the Sudan and its "intelligence" on SAR and his followers is better than on the opposition.

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