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of Lords
1914
17 Nov.

Military operations in E. Africa

330

previous Paper.

The Earl Curzon of Kedleston - To ask the Secretary of State for India whether he can, consistently with the public interest, give any information regarding the military operations that are proceeding in British East Africa and neighbouring parts.

Wednesday 18th November

Mr. G. Fisher

Leave to P.D.?

H. J. R.

18/11/14

Curzon

Lord Curzon will presumably deal with this. - The answer obviously is that it would not be in the public interest to make any statement at present; the Col. Office published on the 6 Oct a summary of proceedings and that a further statement will be published in so far as it is proper to do so.

18.11.14

18.11.14

T.O

subsequent Paper.

I understand this is the course
proposed by the Govt. Personally I
do not like pushing this up any
longer. I shd make a carefully
guarded announcement of
our failure to take Tangai.

J. 18. 11. 14

Ed. Brewer is going to make
a guarded statement of
which he has told me the
general lines.

H. 18. 11. 14

Answers attached on minute sheets.

recd. 27/11/14

Mr. B. Bennett

Mr. Brad

Mr. G. Fiddes.

Circulated for information.

W.S.D.

27/11/14

Eqm 27/11/14

H. J. R.

27/11/14

Alone 27/11/14

of 7 folders

the actual number of
victims at Tanga

adding to latest information

999 killed wounded
and missing

E. J. Panzer

11/14

House of Lords.

Official Report - 18 November

332

BRITISH EAST AFRICA AND THE PERSIAN GULF.

* **L. CURZON OF KEDLESTON:** My Lords, I beg to ask the Secretary of State for India whether he can, consistently with the public interest, give any information regarding the military operations that are proceeding in British East Africa and neighbouring parts, and I may, perhaps, be allowed to say a few words as to my reason for putting this Question. One of the features of the war in which we are engaged is that it is almost a world-wide war. Wherever the German flag is planted in different parts of the world we and our Allies have been engaged in endeavouring to pull it down. That is a necessary and a proper feature of the campaign, and the operation has been conducted with success; we are glad to say, in many parts of the world. The German flag has been hauled down, as we know, in Samoa, in Kiaochau, in German New Guinea, in some of the Islands of the Pacific, and we have every reason to believe and hope that it will not be flying very much longer in German South-West Africa.

But as regards British East Africa, where there are very extensive German possessions, extending for many hundreds of miles and covering many millions of acres co-terminous with our own, although military operations have been proceeding, scarcely a word—I think I may say not one word—of information has been vouchsafed to the British public. It was only by accident that I myself was aware that a considerable number of Indian troops were operating in that part of the world; and the nature of the fighting, which must have been severe, was really brought home to the British public for the first time only a few days ago by the publication in the newspapers of an extensive list of casualties. I am aware of a case where a parent heard for the first time of the part of the world in which his son was being engaged by reading the news of the death of the officer on this distant field of battle. The full extent of those casualties I do not for the moment bear in mind, but I think I am not wrong in saying that the number of killed and wounded has been considerable.

In this position of affairs I was somewhat startled to read only yesterday in *The Times* newspaper the letter of an officer serving at the front in British East

Africa, which, as it may have escaped the attention of some of your Lordships, you will perhaps permit me to read. This letter was written on October 31—that is to say, five weeks ago—and the writer expressed himself as follows—

"I have been away at the front for six weeks, fighting—

In other words, there was already in existence six weeks before that date—

"I volunteered in the East Africa Rifles as a trooper. They then said that they wanted to form a Somali troop to go to the front at once, so I applied for me. So I went with him down to the Tsavo as a corporal acting as an officer. We had one quite big fight, when we were attached to one company of the King's African Rifles. The Germans, about 150 of them, very nearly surrounded us at dawn. —, who was in command of the King's African Rifles, got killed in the first ten minutes, but we drove the Germans back and made them absolutely run. We got fifteen of them and wounded eight, and the Germans got six of our soldiers, seven of our mules, and wounded four. We then had to hold the place for two days until we were relieved by No. 2 Company of the K.A.R. People don't seem to realise at home what a big thing this is out here. The Germans have got anything from 6,000 to 12,000 troops and lots of guns."

My Lords, we have had no opportunity of realising whether it is a big thing or a small thing over here, because we know nothing at all about it. I, of course, have not the slightest desire to press the Secretary of State to give us any information which he considers it necessary in the interests of the Government or military operations to withhold; but I submit that if large forces are engaged in that part of the world, if the danger that is being met is a considerable one, as appears to be the case, and if the number of casualties is large, it would relieve a great deal of legitimate anxiety at home if we could hear something about the operations. The fighting, as I understand, is not merely in British East Africa or on the borders of British East Africa. I believe it extends to the British territory lying to the south of the Province which we call British East Africa—that is to say, the neighbourhood of Lake Tanganyika and on the frontiers of Nyassaland. Where exactly fighting is taking place I do not know, because nothing has appeared about it in the papers; but there, again, I am under the impression that I have seen a list of casualties recorded in the Press.

Although the part of the world to which I am next about to refer is not contiguous to British East Africa, and

*Statement
as to operations
fighting was
published in
Lancet*

therefore is not, perhaps, fairly covered by my Question on the Paper, yet I should be grateful if the Secretary of State could also tell me something about the fighting that is also proceeding in another and a very important area of conflict, I mean the Persian Gulf. Here the only information that we have we owe to the Government themselves. About a week ago, I think it was, they published the important and, to me, joyful tidings that they had taken the Turkish fort and port of Fao at the mouth of the Shat-el-Arab, which is the estuary of the Tigris and the Euphrates. But yesterday I read in the Press that the Secretary of State for India, the noble Marquess, had himself authorised the communication of the following announcement regarding military operations now in progress at the head of the Persian Gulf:—

"On the 11th inst., at 5.30 a.m., the Turks made a determined attack on our outposts, but were held in check by the 117th Mahrattas and finally routed by a counter-attack made by the 20th Infantry, supported by fire from a mountain battery. Our casualties were few; those of the enemy at least 80. On the 14th further troops arrived from India under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir A. Barrett—

The large scale of the operations is sufficiently indicated by the fact that you take one of the most capable Indian officers and place him in command of what is obviously a military expedition of some size. The official statement goes on to say—

"On the 15th the latter (Sir A. Barrett), hearing that a strong force of the enemy with mountain artillery were occupying a post about four miles distant, sent General Delamain with three battalions and two mountain batteries to evict them. After a sharp action in which his Majesty's ships 'Espiegle' and 'Odia' co-operated, this was successfully accomplished. The enemy's entrenched camp was captured and his losses were very heavy. Several prisoners, including a Turkish major, were captured and two of the enemy's machine guns were destroyed. Our casualties were two officers wounded; rank and file, eight killed and 71 wounded."

It is obvious that military operations of a rather important and serious nature have been going on there. There is not the slightest indication where they are taking place, except that now in the area of the Persian Gulf. I assume that it must be somewhere at the upper end of the Gulf. Again I do not want to press the noble Marquess to give information upon this which should be withheld, but if with regard to the operations either in British East Africa or the Persian Gulf he can give us any information I am sure we shall be grateful to receive it.

"THE MARQUESS OF CREWE: My Lords, it is evident from what the noble Earl has said, that he fully understands the nature of the limitations that have to be set upon the giving of information in respect of military operations in different parts of the world. It is, of course, clear, if one reflects, that those limitations do not apply with absolute equality in all areas; but, on the other hand, it is probably safer and wiser to lay down the general rule and to say that speaking broadly the sort of information which is given with regard to operations in Europe must remain as the only kind of information which can be given about operations in other parts of the world. Therefore the noble Earl and his friends will, I am sure, understand that the account which I am about to give of what generally has occurred in East Africa is as far as the Government are able to go at the moment.

As the noble Earl pointed out, German East Africa is a large and important Colony. It covers, I think, some 350,000 square miles. It has, of course, a large native population, and it has a white, German, population of between 5,000 and 6,000; and in that connection it is important to note, although I do not know what the proportion of the sexes may be, that in a planter's country of that kind the proportion of males, and probably of males of fighting age, must be infinitely larger than such a population would indicate in a European country. Those forces there, those white inhabitants of German East Africa, a large proportion of whom it must be remembered must have served in the German Army, have been reinforced from different sources; we are told, to a certain extent, by Reservists from other parts of the world who were brought there because, I suppose, there was doubt or difficulty about bringing them to Europe. There may have been some despatch of Regular troops even from the East, but of that I am not quite certain; but I believe that some naval forces were landed also from the Far East. The Germans in East Africa are well provided with guns in the ordinary sense, and also with a number of machine guns, and therefore, as the House will see, they constitute what in America I believe is called a formidable proposition.

British East Africa is not quite so large. It covers, I think, about 250,000 square miles. The white population is somewhere

about the same, rather less I imagine, and, of course, it does not contain the military element which the German Colony must contain. In both countries there is a native force. In German East Africa there is a force of native infantry and of native police numbering altogether several thousands. In British East Africa there is a considerable force of similar police, and also a body, though not so large, of the force which the noble Earl mentioned—a quite efficient force, well officered, and by no means badly manned, the King's African Rifles. It was clear, therefore, that as matters stood at the beginning of the war our position in East Africa could not be an altogether secure one. The initial position of the Germans was stronger than ours. We also had to remember that German East Africa borders both on Nyassaland, as the noble Earl has pointed out, and also on Uganda, in each of which there is a force—in Uganda some King's African Rifles, and in Nyassaland a small force and also a small proportion of white men who act as volunteers. But those colonies also constituted relatively a source rather of weakness than of strength as compared with German East Africa. It was therefore necessary to reinforce the colony from India, and at an early date a small force was sent that was afterwards considerably increased. Fighting, I think, actually began up on the Western side before any of the fresh Indian troops had arrived there, and it has been continuing at a great number of different points since, with various forces engaged and with somewhat varying results. And as we learned more of the German preparations it became necessary further to reinforce from India. Of the different actions that have taken place, no less than seven—small actions of different kinds—have taken place within the confines of British East Africa. There was one, to which I think the noble Earl alluded, in Nyassaland, and there have been others on the borders.

EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON: That was on the Tsavo in British East Africa.

THE MARQUESS OF CREWE: Yes; but I think the noble Earl also alluded to some fighting having taken place in Nyassaland about which he said casualty lists had appeared, which was, I think, the case.

EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON: Yes.

THE MARQUESS OF CREWE: Those different operations have not taken place without considerable losses to ourselves. In one particular case, I am sorry to say, an attack was made in the South on a very strong position which was powerfully held by the enemy with a number of guns and machine-guns. Very heavy casualties were suffered by our troops there without their achieving the object for which they were immediately striving. The total casualties in all the operations in East Africa during the two months amount to something over 900.

At an early stage I noticed that some of the German publicists, speaking of the fighting that was likely or sure to take place in or in the neighbourhood of their colonies, pointed out that the result of those actions, which they seemed to assume would in all cases be unfavourable to themselves, could not affect the ultimate result of the war. That, of course, is quite true; the fate of all the different German possessions in different parts of the world must depend upon the ultimate settlement at the close of the war. But it is necessary for us to preserve the position of Great Britain as the paramount country in Central and Southern Africa. Therefore the Union of South Africa has undertaken a task of its own; and in East Africa we are bound to maintain our position there and to repel with all the forces we can muster any attacks which are made by our German neighbours, and, where occasions are favourable and the forces available make it possible, to attack in our turn. That is all the information which I am able to give the noble Earl. He will understand that I do not mention the names of the particular places at which various actions have occurred or the particular troops which have been employed, although there is no harm in mentioning some of the particular Indian regiments engaged, and I can do so if it is desired.

The noble Earl passed on to a different part of the world and asked me some questions about the Persian Gulf, as to which we have been rather more handsome, as he admitted, in the information we have given. So much so that, owing to the difficulty of communication with those parts of the world where the telegraph service is not very easily conducted, that which we have put in the newspapers

and which the noble Earl read out about the operations at the head of the Persian Gulf—the noble Earl is right in thinking that the operations that have taken place are in the immediate neighbourhood of the Shat-el-Arab—practically covers all that we know ourselves; and I fear, therefore, that I have very little more information that I can give the noble Earl. But may I say this much, that when Turkey went to war with us one of her first steps, carrying out, indeed, what had been her apparent policy some little time previously, was to assert herself at the head of the Persian Gulf in a part of the world where we, as is known, have a very special interest, and where also our Ally, the Sheikh of Mohammerah, who is, as we know, under Persian suzerainty but who is on special terms of intimacy with the British Government, was severely threatened by the Turks. They destroyed the telegraph station at Fao, and announced their intention of stopping the navigation of the Shat-el-Arab. It was clearly impossible for us, not merely in view of our positive and actual interests in that region but also in view of the necessity of keeping up our due name in the minds of the Arab world, to tolerate such violent proceedings as those. Therefore we thought it right to send an expedition of considerable strength under a distinguished General—one of our best Indian officers, as the noble Earl has pointed out—in order to make it clear to the Turks that they cannot venture to assert themselves in that region in the manner in which they have been attempting to do. And I say with the utmost confidence that a step of that kind receives as much approval, if not more, in the Moslem world in India as it does in any other part of the British Empire.

THE EARL OF MAYO: Might I ask the noble Marquess whether there will be published a list of the casualties in the operations in British East Africa. He mentioned 900.

THE MARQUESS OF CREWE: I think that most of the British officers' casualties have already appeared in the newspapers.

THE EARL OF MAYO: I mean not only officers but white settlers who have enlisted as privates. I have a relation out there.

THE MARQUESS OF CREWE: I have no doubt that their names will appear in due course. As a matter of fact, I think the names of some of the volunteers have appeared already.

EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON: I should like to thank the noble Marquess for the information he has given me in reply to my Question, and to say that we on this side of the House heartily wish success to His Majesty's arms in the two theatres of conflict to which reference has been made.