

Peril in South Arabia

A general strike and incessant bloody rioting by rival Arab nationalist forces in Aden have given the newly arrived United Nations mission a grim indication of the difficulties it faces. The three-man team has the responsibility of making recommendations to Secretary General Thant on means of resolving the crisis in South Arabia and promoting viable, democratic government.

In the course of unraveling an empire, Britain has had miserable luck in setting up federations. The attempt in South Arabia to federate the city and port of Aden, whose Arab nationalist leadership looks to Cairo, with the primitive sheikdoms of the interior might have failed even in a vacuum. Its fate was placed in triple jeopardy once Nasser, with his Yemeni revolutionary clients, weighed in on one side and Saudi Arabia began supporting rival forces.

Now the only Adeni nationalist leaders with established followings are in Egypt or Yemen. Refusing even to meet the U.N. mission officially, they demand dismantling of the federation as the price for their cooperation in seeking a solution. Terrorism fueled from Cairo and Taiz mounts daily in Aden against both Briton and Arab.

When the British agreed to a U.N. mission last year, they talked of giving it scope to recommend constitutional changes and a system for U.N. supervision of elections. But Britain now clearly intends to grant independence to the shaky federation government at the earliest possible moment, without making any effort to hold elections—admittedly a very difficult task—and without giving South Arabia any defense guarantee. Britain evidently will keep some troops in Aden after independence, but expects to be out completely before the end of 1968.

In these circumstances, it is doubtful whether the federation government will survive long enough to accept independence or whether, if it does, it can control its British-trained, ten-battalion army.

Hope of averting chaos and even war lies in the reluctance of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to have a showdown at this time. With an estimated 50,000 Egyptian troops still mired in Yemen, President Nasser may hesitate to take on still another struggle that could prove equally long and costly.

If this is the case, the touring U.N. mission might yet find limited opportunities for useful service, but the odds are formidable.

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