

STATUS OF U.N. FORCE IN MIDEAST UNCERTAIN

How Long It Stays, Its Functions Are Matters That Seem to Depend Largely on Nasser's Attitude

NO CHANGE FOR PRESENT

By THOMAS J. HAMILTON

The Suez problem, which was the immediate cause of the hostilities in the Middle East last October and November, now being settled on Colonel Nasser's terms.

So far as the United Nations was concerned, this has been inevitable since the final withdrawal of the British and French expeditionary forces last December. They withdrew in the knowledge that the United Nations Emergency Force would get out of the Canal Zone immediately after they got out, and that Egypt would then regain complete control.

Unremitting United States pressure was responsible for this unconditional withdrawal; but it is still impossible to understand why Britain and France complied without even stating the case for their side in public.

The resolution creating the United Nations Emergency Force said that it was to help carry out "all" the objectives of the General Assembly's Nov. 2 cease-fire resolution. And in that basic resolution the Assembly urged "that upon the cease-fire being effective, steps be taken to reopen the Suez Canal and restore secure freedom of navigation."

Semantic Obstacles

The two resolutions, after making allowance for the aggressions that the United Nations has committed against the English language, were fairly clear. They certainly meant that the presence of the international force was to help bring about a settlement that would insulate operation of the canal from the politics of any nation, and surely would not have permitted the arrangements now announced unilaterally by Egypt.

It was generally assumed after the cease-fire, in fact, that the U. N. E. F. would stay in the Canal Zone until a settlement assuring "secure freedom of navigation" had been achieved.

However, Secretary General Hammarskjold decided that the force must be withdrawn without even waiting until the canal—at a cost to the United Nations of more than \$20,000,000—had been cleared of the ships sunk by Egypt.

Mr. Hammarskjold's decision was based mainly upon two principles, which also have direct bearing on the continued presence of the United Nations force in the Gaza Strip and Gulf of Aqaba area.

These were: The United Nations force could be stationed in Egypt only with Egypt's consent; the use of it "must be impartial, in the sense that it does not serve as a means to force settlement, in the interest of one party, of political conflicts or legal issues recognized as controversial."

Further Study

Other fundamental documents are: Mr. Hammarskjold's report to the Assembly of Jan. 25; the Assembly's second resolution of Feb. 2, which recommended that, after a final Israeli withdrawal, the force should be stationed "on" the Egyptian-Israeli armistice demarcation line, and requested Mr. Hammarskjold to carry out "other measures" contained in the Jan. 25 report.

With these must be studied the Secretary General's statement to the Assembly on March 8, just before it recessed, that he would "leave the choice of these 'other measures' to be decided in the light of further study and consultation."

There has been no further disclosure of Mr. Hammarskjold's intentions since his return from his talks in Cairo with Colonel Nasser. Uncertainty is increased by the prominence given to earlier statements by United States, Canadian, Israeli and other delegates on where the United Nations force should be stationed, and what it should accomplish.

But for the time being, at least, the situation in the Gulf of Aqaba area is relatively clear. In his Jan. 25 report, Mr. Hammarskjold said that the United

Nations force should not be used to "prejudice the solution of the controversial questions" involved in Egypt's asserted right of blockade.

However, he said that "at least temporarily, the U. N. E. F. may function in support of mutual restraint in accordance with the foregoing." The Secretary General has, in fact, given instructions that the United Nations police troops must not be withdrawn from the area without consulting him.

Furthermore, he told his Advisory Committee after his return from Cairo that Egypt had promised, for the time being, to make no move to oust the United Nations force and install Egyptian troops. As long as the United Nations contingent stays at Sharm el Sheikh the Israeli port of Elath can continue to function.

Gaza Situation

The situation in the Gaza Strip is much more complicated, as witness the confusion that resulted when the United Nations force replaced the Israeli occupation troops. Maj. Gen. E. L. M. Burns promptly started taking over the administration, and was abruptly called to a halt after Colonel Nasser appointed his own administrative Governor.

Egypt is apparently administering the Gaza Strip, subject to whatever arrangements Mr. Hammarskjold and General Burns can make with Egypt for United Nations participation in preventing the resumption of raids on Israel.

The fundamental problem, however, is the same now as when the United Nations force was being organized last November: How long will it stay in Egypt or Egyptian-controlled territory, and under what conditions will it be withdrawn?

Some delegates hold that once Egypt gave her consent, the decision on withdrawal was placed exclusively in the hands of the United Nations. Lester B. Pearson of Canada, the author of the resolution on the force, is one of these.

All that is known about Mr. Hammarskjold's position is that whenever Egypt requests withdrawal, he will consult with his Advisory Committee on the matter of submitting the issue to the Assembly.

Withdrawing Forces

India, Indonesia and Yugoslavia—which together have contributed half of the United Nations force—have already made clear that they will withdraw their contingents any time Colonel Nasser asks them to do so regardless of whether Mr. Hammarskjold or the Assembly agrees.

However, it is to be expected that Colonel Nasser will make no move in these directions until after the Suez Canal problem is laid to rest. Colonel Nasser's next move probably would be to re-impose the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Gaza Strip could be allowed to remain quiet until the Egyptian Army is again in a position to fight. But some delegates will be very surprised if any vestige of the United Nations force is still in Egyptian territory six months from now.