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*Despatch from the Government of India (Foreign and Political Department),
(No. 11 of 1925), to the Secretary of State for India.*

Principles to be adopted in flying on the frontier.

Simla,

15th October 1925.

MY LORD,

In his Despatch No. 3, Secret, dated 9th August 1923, Lord Peel raised various questions touching the use of aeroplanes in the political control of the tribes on the North-West Frontier. Similar questions had engaged our anxious consideration when the use of aircraft for the quasi-administrative control of our frontier was first mooted, and have been constantly before us ever since. The views of our local officers on the specific points raised by Lord Peel have been transmitted to you in our Foreign Secretary's weekly letters from time to time, and the more important of them are attached to this despatch.* Hitherto our actual experience in the use of aircraft on the frontier has been so slight as to give these views the appearance at any rate of a theoretical rather than a practical character. The recent operations against the Abdur Rahman Khel and other Mahsud tribes, however, have furnished us with the experience that we needed, and we now have the honour to place our conclusions before you.

2. In para. 6 of his Despatch Lord Peel referred to a theory to which publicity had been given in England, that outrages against women on the frontier—there had been two particularly distressing tragedies shortly before he wrote—were the outcome of a policy of retaliation by tribesmen for the necessarily indiscriminate bombing to which they had been exposed. Without admitting the justice of the epithet "indiscriminate"—for operations are invariably preceded by warnings to the tribesmen to move their women and children from the threatened areas—we may say at once that there is no evidence whatsoever to support this theory. The perpetrators of the Foulkes, Ellis, and Watts outrages have never attempted to plead this justification; and not only have the tribes to which they belong never been bombed themselves, but they have no dealings or connection or sympathy with the Mahsuds or Wazirs.

3. Experience has now shown that the damage to personnel and even to material that air operations can inflict under the peculiar conditions holding on most parts of the frontier is very small. Thus, in the recent operations, it is estimated that there were 11 human casualties only, killed and wounded, caused by 154 tons of bombs and 100,000 rounds of ammunition. This fact has an important bearing on the general effect of air operations on the mentality of our tribes. There is no doubt of the potency of the fear of becoming subject to air operations. Of this there was striking proof during the recent operations, when the rifles stolen from the Gumal police station were surrendered by tribesmen from fear of being subjected to the same punishment from the air as their Abdur Rahman Khel neighbours. As soon as the period of apprehension and the first shock are over, however, our evidence goes to show that it is not the way force is applied but its effectiveness that is feared, and to that extent resented. Once force is actually applied, the tribesmen probably dislike land and air operations equally, except that in the latter his prized inaccessibility is taken from him and his opportunities for hitting back are far more limited. Of personal rancour over air operations, or of retaliation on women or other individuals, there has been no sign. Throughout the recent operations the attitude of the jirgas was friendly, and for officers of the Royal Air Force the Mahsuds showed a marked respect based on admiration for the work they do. True, we still find it necessary to retain the standing reward for the release of Royal Air Force officers who are captured by tribesmen, but the increasingly good treatment they have received at their hands points to the same conclusion.

* Not reprinted.

4. We do not think that the danger of alienating the well-disposed elements in a tribal community by the use of aircraft is a real one. Once operations are launched, whether by land or air, the well-disposed elements in a tribe suffer of necessity with those whose misdeeds have brought about the operations. But the principle of communal responsibility is the basis of Pathan society, and however much the well-disposed may attempt to evade it, they are conscious of no sense of injustice if it is enforced.

5. Lord Peel referred to the danger of sound old frontier methods falling into disuse, owing to the power that aircraft places in the hands of political officers to interpose spasmodically and dramatically in tribal matters. The possibility of misuse is inherent in a weapon so easy of application as the aeroplane, and from the outset we have been on our guard against the danger to which Lord Peel refers. It is indeed largely for this reason that we have thought it advisable to retain the control of all forms of active air operations almost entirely in our hands. Except when our forces are actually being attacked—and there may be other cases of emergency where it may be essential to act immediately—aircraft may not be employed offensively without our previous and specific sanction. As Your Lordship is aware, this sanction is given sparingly and in serious cases only. Whether in the future some delegation of control may prove advisable with the growth of our experience in the use of air power on the frontier, remains to be seen.

6. On the other hand, we do not think there is serious danger of our frontier administration acquiring a reputation for the employment of methods of barbarism. For one thing, air operations, as we have shown, are not in their actual effect inhuman. Under the strict conditions we have laid down for the issue of specific warnings in each case and with the very restricted use of aircraft that we sanction, we do not anticipate any genuine well-informed criticism of air operations on the frontier. The cruelties to which the inhabitants of our districts are exposed at the hands of the transfrontier tribesmen are too well known for British India to feel any sympathy with the transfrontier tribesmen in any punishment they may receive. The Government of Afghanistan no doubt will always be ready to pose as the champion of the tribes against a ruthless oppressor. But apart altogether from the harshness which they themselves exercise in suppressing their recalcitrant tribesmen, their power to exploit our use of aircraft must lose its force now that they have acquired an air force of their own, and have even—however ineffectively—used it against their own rebellious subjects.

We have, &c.,

(Signed) READING.
 W. R. BIRDWOOD.
 B. N. SARMA.
 BASIL P. BLACKETT.
 A. P. MUDDIMAN.
 B. N. MITRA.
 FAZL-I-HUSAIN.
