Land Reform in Egypt
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Letters to The Times

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Accomplishments of British During Their Rule Pointed Out

The writer of the following letter, one-time Chief of Intelligence for the British Forces in Egypt and head of the British Political Intelligence Center for the Middle East, later served as correspondent for The Times of London in that area.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES:

In your issue of Nov. 19 C. L. Sulzberger writes: "Egypt's basic problem is too little land for too many people. * * * The British, who governed Egypt for decades, never were able to solve this—and never seriously tried, despite a leavening of social and industrial reforms."

The decades of British rule in Egypt were from 1882 to 1920. This period saw the construction in Egypt of the Assiut and Esna barrages, the enlargement of the Delta barrage, the construction of the Zifta barrage, and the construction and enlargement of the Aswan Dam. These irrigation works, and the introduction of perennial irrigation which they made possible, resulted in the increase of the annual crop area by something over 60 per cent. In the light of this, it would be interesting to know what, in Mr. Sulzberger's judgment, would constitute a "serious" attempt to deal with the problem of land shortage.

Misstatements such as Mr. Sulzberger's have become common form about Egypt or India or other ex-dependent territories. This is unfortunate, not so much for the injustice done to the work of administrators and technicians, who are dead or soon will be, but because it falsifies the real problem that faces the national Governments of these countries (and those Western countries which wish to help them) in their declared intention to raise the standard of living of their peoples.

Population Growth

The problem is not the static one of too little land for too many people, but that of populations in predominantly agricultural countries growing faster than agricultural productivity. In the period mentioned above the population of Egypt increased from under 7 to over 13 millions, and is now more than 20 millions. It has been estimated that in the period required to construct the irrigation works which would finally exhaust the water flowing down the Nile the increase of population would cancel out the advantage gained by the extension of the cultivable area. It might therefore be more realistic to talk of preventing any further decline in the standard of living rather than of improving it.

Mr. Sulzberger might have been on firmer ground if he had argued that the British ought to have followed up this immense agricultural expansion during the period of their rule with an attack on the system of agrarian land ownership. Even so, he would find it difficult to establish that—even if the imposition of a social revolution by an outside Power had been conceivable at that time—it would have been practicable under Egyptian conditions. The British showed later in the Sudan that they were willing and able to introduce and make a success of a revolutionary experiment in peasant-Government co-ownership where conditions were favorable.

C. D. QUILLIAM.

Kingston, Ont., Canada, Nov. 23, 1954.

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