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WORKING GROUP FOR ASIA AND THE FAR EAST

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PART II

COUNTRY STUDIES

I. GILBERT AND ELLICE, AND SOLOMON ISLANDS

/GILBERT

GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS COLONY AND
BRITISH SOLOMON ISLANDS PROTECTORATE

I. Impact of War and Extent of Recovery

The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony consists of several groups of islands, all of which, save Ocean Island, are coral atolls:

1. The Ellice Islands, area 14 square miles, population (1940) 4,613.
2. Fanning Island, area 15 square miles, population (1942) 255; Washington Island, area 6 square miles, population (1942) 99; Ocean Island, area six miles in circumference, population 140 Europeans, 684 Asiatics.
3. Christmas Island, largest atoll in the Pacific, 100 miles in circumference, population (1940) 11.
4. The Phoenix Group, area 16 square miles, population (1942) 850.
5. Gilbert Islands, area 166 square miles, population 26,180.

The revenue of the Colony for year ending 30 June 1941, was £58,559. This included an Imperial grant of £938 and a Colonial Development Grant of £4,358. The expenditure was £79,343. Imports 1938-39, £178,767. The principal crops are pandanus, fruits and coconuts.

The British Solomon Islands Protectorate includes the islands of Guadalcanal, Malaita, San Cristoval, New Georgia, Ysabel, Choiseul, Shortland, Mono (or Treasury), Vella Lavella, Ronongo, Gizo, Rendova, Russell, Florida, Rennell, and numerous small islands, including the Lord Howe Group or Ontong Java, the Santa Cruz Islands, Ticopia and Mitre Islands, and the Duff, or Wilson Group.

The land area of the Protectorate is estimated at 12,400 square miles. The largest island is Guadalcanal (estimated, 2,500 square miles) and the most populous is Malaita (estimated 40,000 inhabitants). Malaria is prevalent. The population at the census of 1931 was, natives 93,415;

/Europeans

Europeans 497; Asiatics 193. Of the natives, about 4,000 (in Rennel, Ontong Java, Ticoia, etc) are Polynesians, the remainder Melanesians. There are no native states and the social order is primitive. Education is entirely in the hands of the five missions.

In the Solomon Islands coconuts, rubber, sweet potatoes, pineapples, and bananas are grown. The value of exports in 1940-41 was £131,938, including copra, 12,991 tons, £100,989 value; timber 2,021,745 super feet, £11,807; gold 963 fine ounces, £10,130; trocas shell, 147 tons, £7,157.

Australian notes and silver are the medium of exchange. No gold is in circulation.

In the Gilbert and Solomon Islands there was no significant loss of manpower during the war, but there was a serious interruption of education programmes. The British Phosphate Commission's installation at Ocean Island was largely destroyed and the export reduced to nil. Reconstruction is now in progress with an export target of 300,000 tons per annum. Copra exports from the Gilberts were normally 7,000 tons per annum and were reduced to nil. Recovery is seriously delayed by lack of overseas and inter-island transport. The coconut plantations in the Solomons (62,000 acres) suffered 20 - 25 percent destruction and universal deterioration due to under-maintenance, including loss of cattle herds. The copra export was reduced to nil. Recovery to the previous maximum of 23,000 tons per annum is unlikely and any recovery is seriously retarded by lack of overseas and inter-island transport. In the Gilbert Islands the Australian-based commercial firms evacuated the Colony and have not returned. The Co-operative Societies were disrupted but are now re-forming in relationship with a Government Trading Scheme which is expected to develop into a Co-operative Wholesale Society dealing in merchandise and copra. In the Solomons all commercial and economic undertakings were abandoned and are unlikely to be resumed until normal sea communications with the Protectorate is restored, the labour supply problem has eased and the coconut plantations have resumed production.

/Essential

Essential supplies are at present maintained through the Government Trading Scheme by small government vessels which will be quite unable to cope with any reviving commercial and industrial activity. Gold prospecting was interrupted and has not yet recommenced.

The population of the Gilberts is increasing rapidly and the Islands are overcrowded. Substantial schemes for the acquisition of land required for the surplus population is an important part of development programme. The population in the Solomons is also beginning to increase.

The present labour force in the Solomons is inadequate for post-war requirements because of the disruption of labour supply and unwillingness of labourers to accept employment on plantations as before the war. The development programme for both the Gilbert and Solomon Islands will require the temporary importation of managerial and technical personnel.

It is proposed to facilitate the migration from the overcrowded Gilbert and Ellice Islands to the practically uninhabited Line Islands.

Foreign trade in the Gilberts is small. The phosphate exports will continue to give it a pronounced favourable balance. Over the four-year period 1946-50 the Colony will require to import an annual average of about £175,000 capital goods and general merchandise. Freight accounts for an unusually high proportion of the cost of imports. About 350,000 tons of phosphates and 7,000 tons of copra may be made available for export annually as from 1948. In the Solomons foreign trade also is small. Over the four-year period the Protectorate will require to import an annual average of about £250,000 capital goods and general merchandise. Over the same period it may be able to make available for export a like value of agricultural produce. Both imports and exports will be increased if communications develop.

There are no railways in either the Gilbert or Solomon Islands. In the Gilberts the existing roads, waterways and airfields are adequate, and in the Solomons there are 200 miles of new road. A substantial increase is required

/in the number

in the number of small sized sea-going vessels for inter-island transport.

In the Gilberts further recovery would be impaired if capital were not provided to finance the Co-operative Wholesale Society. In the Solomons non-payment of war damage compensation in respect of larger plantations is partly cause of the delay in their rehabilitation.

The under-supply of inducement goods is delaying recovery of agricultural produce for export.
