

THE HEALTH OF THE BANABANS, 1946 - 48.

1. It has been implied, if not specifically argued, that the Banabans were in no fit state, mentally or physically, to negotiate with Maynard, the representative of the BPC, so soon after their arrival in Rabi. (This argument must relate to April, 1947, and not March, 1946, since no negotiations took place during the latter visit of Maynard.

2. In this connexion, it should be noted that, although the actual negotiations between Maynard and the Banabans took place on the 10th April, 1947, (and preceding days), no such criticisms have been made in respect of the negotiations concerning the Statement of Intentions between the Banabans and Maude and Macdonald on the 8th - 10th May, 1947 - only two months later.

3. The earliest mention of the condition of the Banabans is contained in a confidential memorandum addressed by the Commissioner, Northern Division, to the Colonial Secretary, Fiji, dated the 18th January, 1946, concerning a visit which he made to Nuku, Rabi, on the 12th January, 1946. He wrote:-

"The Banabans, with but a few exceptions, were living in tents. My impressions were generally favourable. They seemed healthy, well-fed, clothed and housed, cheerful and contented. They had been provided with a temporary, but excellent, water supply running right through the camp. Each tent was furnished with several Army stretchers, native mats, chairs, boxes, trunks, bed-clothes, water drums, biscuit tins, cooking and eating utensils..... There seemed to be little activity about the camp... The thought that struck me most was for work of some kind. The atmosphere was apathetic..."

4. The above report is supported by a confidential demi-official letter from Kennedy to Vaskess, dated the 1st January, 1946, in which the former wrote:-

"For the present I am pleased to say that we have / a satisfactory working arrangement for the temporary settlement of the people on the sunny north-west coast. They are still in the main camp prepared for them at Nuku but today two parties comprising about 120 people are moving out to other camps..."

13. The health of the community has been exceptionally good. There has been only one mild outbreak of diarrhoea".

5. In a progress report on the settlement in Rabi, sent to the CS, Fiji, under cover of his letter of the 28th January, 1946, Kennedy wrote:-

"7. The s.s. "Triona" arrived at Rabi on the evening of the 14th December and the immigrants disembarked at Nuku on the following day. The camp already prepared for them proved adequate for their accommodation. The weather remained fair for several weeks...."

(In this connexion, it may be noted that Kennedy, who inspected Rabi as a potentially suitable homeland for the Banabans in October, 1945, then ordered two hutments to be purchased from the Naval Station in Suva and shipped to Rabi).

6. In the report mentioned in paragraph 5, which covered the period from the 23rd October to the 28th January, 1946, Kennedy further wrote:-

"28. Hospital facilities are, at present, in a very primitive, though not necessarily inefficient, state. A Fijian N.M.P. is stationed at Nuku pending the arrival of a Banaban N.M.P. from the Phoenix Islands. The present N.M.P. is giving satisfactory service under difficult conditions"

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"Health statistics, as recorded at the hospital, are shown in Appendix 8. The incidence of pulmonary complaints is much more severe than is usual among the Banabans and this can only be attributed to the change of climate and particularly to the dampness of the Fiji climate at this time of year.

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In addition to the N.M.P., the hospital staff consists of a trained Banaban Dresser, an Ellice Islands Dresser on loan from the GEIC and a trained Banaban Nurse.

.....

A Child Welfare Clinic has been initiated at the present temporary hospital".

7. In Appendix 8 abovementioned, the following principal statistics are recorded for the period from the 15th December, 1945, to the 28th January, 1946:-

Births - 5.  
Deaths - 3 (aged 79, 49 and 1½ years).  
Out-patients - 1221, of which 110, or only 9%, were categorized as suffering from chest pains, coughs, etc.

8. In his covering letter of the 28th January, 1946, Kennedy wrote:-

"8. A slight depression of spirits among the elder people has been noticeable during the past two weeks. This is probably due to the state of the weather. Alternate damp heat waves and chill damp winds are responsible for a considerable number of pulmonary illnesses...

It is not expected that this depression will develop into a feeling of dissatisfaction with life on Rabi or with projected developments for the present year".

9. Maynard of the BPC visited the island from the 19th - 22nd March, 1946, and two points regarding his visit are worth making, especially since he was genuinely interested and attached to the Banabans and had their best interests at heart, whilst simultaneously being a loyal negotiator for the BPC:-

- (a) he made no comment on the state of health of the Banabans, which he would almost certainly have done if he had gained the impression that they were suffering from poor health; and,
- (b) it was the Banabans, and not Maynard, who was on a goodwill visit, who raised the question of the acquisition of further lands on Ocean Island, whether the 1940 offer of the BPC was still open, and whether payment for surface rights and royalty could be increased to £225 per acre and 1/6d per ton of phosphate exported. Maynard made it expressly clear that his visit was not for the purpose of discussing the 1940 offer though he was prepared to learn their wishes in the matter.

10. Nor, at the time of the meeting of the Banabans with Maynard, did Kennedy, who had obviously been keeping a close surveillance over the health of the Banabans since their arrival in Rabi, make any comment on this point, which he might possibly have been expected to do if he felt that discussions regarding the BPC 1940 offer were to take place.

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11. In a confidential letter addressed to Macdonald on the 8th June, 1946, Kennedy wrote:-

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"There have been several factors making for discontent. Some of these, such as sickness, have been going on for some months. We have had a higher than ordinary death rate from pulmonary troubles and diarrhoea, and, during the recent measles epidemic, which has just come to an end, we have had 15 deaths. Altogether, since the arrival of the Banabans on the 15th December, we have had 27 deaths".

12. The next officers to visit Rabi, who had an opportunity to make some general assessment regarding the health and well-being of the Banaban community were Messrs. Maude and Macdonald. They visited the island from the 27th - 29th June, 1946, for the purpose of investigating the complaints of the Banabans concerning Kennedy. Whilst Maude, in his memorandum of the 27th July, 1946, made no reference to the health or well-being of the Banaban community, both officers did not fail to note the dispiritedness and apathetic atmosphere among the community, especially insofar as the older members of the community were concerned, though this may well have been in large degree due to home-sickness and the relative discomfort of conditions on Rabi.

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(See also paragraph 22 below).

13. In his handing-over statement to Major Holland, dated the 10th August, 1946, Kennedy wrote:-

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"In the six months which have elapsed since the date of the above-mentioned Progress Report (see paragraph 5 above), the main feature of development has been the slow dispersal of families from the temporary canvas camp at Virginia Cove to houses constructed of native materials in various hamlets up and down the north-west coast. At the date of writing about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the immigrants remain at the original camp. Some of these are employed by the Administration, some by the Banaban Co-operative Store while the remainder seem to prefer to remain in proximity to the Store whence they can collect exotic food supplies with the minimum of effort.

The reaction of the settlers on this coast to their new environment has been disappointing. No one, in spite of advice and instructions, has attempted to make a house of sufficient strength to withstand hurricane weather. Very few have commenced to make adequate gardens and there is a general indisposition to go fishing or hunting wild pigs.

During the three months February-April most of the settlers seemed to be possessed of a lethargic apathy, their chief daylight employment being sleeping or gambling. This may have been due to their sudden release from long hours of compulsory labour for the Japanese followed by the receipt of large amounts of money from this Administration (averaging £84 per family) and access to large supplies of easily prepared food.

Since April there has been a gradual improvement due, in no small measure, to the exhaustion of the supplies of unearned money".

14. The Divisional Commissioner, Northern, Mr. J.E. Windrum, visited Rabi in December, 1946, writing inter alia of his visit as follows:-

"I am pleased to record that practically the whole of the refugee camp of army tents has disappeared. Some of these tents have been taken away and erected temporarily in the new settlements, but in most instances house of native construction and design have been built, including such community places as Churches and Council Houses.

.....

Everywhere I visited there were signs of something being done...

I did not sense at any time during my visit the tenseness and sullenness that I had experienced on previous visits, but rather an atmosphere of contentment and purpose.

.....

At the moment one senses about the people a state of flux as they await the Government's reply to their voluntary election to make Rabi their permanent home".

15. The next visitor to the island was Maynard in April, 1947, when he conducted negotiations with the Banabans regarding the acquisition of the remaining mineable land on Ocean Island, land rents, etc. But there is no record, nor suggestion, to show that the Banabans at that time were either mentally or physically unfit to conduct negotiations on their own behalf. On the contrary - in his telegram of the 3rd February, 1947, Holland stated:-

"Banabans have agreed, and most reasonably in my opinion, that agreement with the British Phosphate Commission is a matter of independent settlement" (i.e. from decisions on the future of Government policy).

It is unthinkable that Holland, especially in his capacity as Banaban Adviser, who had the interests of the Banabans very much at heart, would have permitted to conduct the negotiations themselves if he had felt them to be in any way mentally or physically unfitted to do so.

16. The next officers to visit Rabi, who had an opportunity to make some assessment of the health of the Banaban community were Messrs. Maude and Macdonald. They visited the island from the 7th - 13th May, 1947, to discuss the Statement of Intentions with the people. Three points in this respect are worth making:-

(a) in his confidential letter of the 11th July, 1947, forwarding to the High Commissioner a report on the visit, Maude commented as follows:-

"So marked was the change in the spirit of the community (and no less in its material state) since my last visit a year previously....";

(b) as far as the mental state of the community was concerned, the manner in which the Banabans conducted their side of the discussions showed them to be vigorously alert, in that they were voluble, pertinacious and repetitive throughout a period of three full days of intensive discussions. As Maude wrote in his letter above-mentioned:-

"Once everybody had had their say, and every conceivable argument had been repeated, the Banabans were quite prepared (to agree to the holding of a secret ballot)....

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Further, as evidence of their vigour and well-being may be cited the fact that on at least the first two nights dances of welcome for the visitors were held until a late hour each night; and,

- (c) Holland made no suggestion whatever, either then or at the time when the Banabans conducted their final negotiations with Maynard, that they were mentally or physically unfitted to partake in such negotiations.

17. In view of what is recorded in the preceding paragraph, it is hardly arguable that the Banabans were either mentally or physically unfitted to conduct negotiations on their own behalf to their own advantage when Maynard visited the island for this purpose only some 7 weeks previously.

18. Nor when Maynard visited Rabi in August, 1947, to deal with various matters ancillary to the major negotiations, was there any suggestion that the Banabans were unfitted to conduct such negotiations. As on the occasions of March, 1946, and April, 1947, such discussions were conducted in an atmosphere of the greatest amiability.

19. In his despatch to the Secretary of State No. 41 of the 12th September, 1947, the Acting High Commissioner concluded:-

"I visited Rabi in July (1947) and found the Banabans cheeffer and settling down satisfactorily. The general atmosphere has improved greatly since Major Holland took over".

20. Finally, it may be appropriate to add this footnote from a letter addressed to the High Commissioner by Sir Albert Ellis on the 25th September, 1948:-

"The measure of welcome and respect given to me during my visit (to Rabi) could only come from natives who are settled in their new Island home. They and other Islanders are not noted for a sense of gratitude. I can only say there was more evidence of it during my Rambi visit than I have ever experienced at the Islands previously".

21. Whilst, therefore, there are slightly different opinions as to the health and well-being of the Banaban community during 1946, the balance of opinion shows that they would have been temperamentally, mentally and physically unfitted to conduct negotiations with the BPC at that time. Equally, the evidence - this time without differing opinions - reveals that the community had proved entirely resilient by 1947 and were capable in every way to conduct such important negotiations themselves.

22. Paragraph 45 of Maude's report on the future of the Banaban population of Ocean Island; with special relation to their lands and funds, sets out the gist of the Banabans' complaints investigated by Maude and Macdonald in June, 1946 (see paragraph 12 above); one complaint was:

"increasing incidence of sickness, and in particular, pulmonary troubles, diarrhoea & measles; the community had not yet had time to get used to the damper climate of Rabi, which was found to be particularly trying by the more elderly, resulting in a total of 27 deaths".

However, this postscript does not, it is considered, invalidate the conclusion in paragraph 21 above.

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