Against the Grain: British Food Security Policy and Colonial Authority in South-East Asia 1945-1948

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of food security and famine relief in British efforts to reassert their colonial authority in South-East Asia after the Second World War. In the immediate period after the conflict had ended, the British found themselves responsible for the rehabilitation of an area which had been devastated by Japanese occupation. Famine had already caused many civilian deaths in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies and the British sought to prevent further famine in their own colonies of Malaya and Singapore. Maintaining control of these two economically and strategically important territories became a priority for Britain and keeping them supplied with food was a key feature of British efforts to restore their power in South-East Asia. To achieve this objective, the British adopted a regional strategy to managing food shortages. This thesis analyses British efforts to improve food production in Malaya and Singapore but also its attempts to assert control over an international system of food distribution and its policies of rice procurement in Siam (Thailand), Burma, French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) and the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia). This thesis argues that in taking such a transnational and transcolonial approach to dealing with rice shortages in South-East Asia, the British undermined their overall objective of restoring their own colonial authority. While able to prevent famine in Malaya and Singapore, coping with a regional food crisis in South-East Asia brought the British into direct contact with local and also international actors which were increasingly opposed to the continuance of imperial rule.

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AFPFL – Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League

APW – Armistice and Post-War Committee

BFM – British Food Mission

BMA – British Military Administration

BNA – Burma National Army

CFB – Combined Food Board

CO – Colonial Office

COS – Chiefs of Staff

CPB – Communist Party of Burma

CTRC – Combined Thai Rice Commission

DO – Dominions Office

ECAFE – Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East

FAO – Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations

FCB – Fabian Colonial Bureau

FO – Foreign Office

HMG – His Majesty's Government

IEFC – International Emergency Food Council (later Committee of the FAO)

IO – India (and Burma) Office

MCP – Malayan Communist Party

MoF – Ministry of Food

MPAJA – Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army

OSS – Office of Strategic Services

RFCP – Red Flag Communist Party

RPB – Rice Purchasing Board

SACSEA – Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia

SEAC – South East Asia Command

SEAF – South East Asia Food Committee

SOE – Special Operations Executive

WFS – World Food Supply Committee

WO – War Office

UN – United Nations Organisation

UNRRA – United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

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Introduction

On the morning of 5 September 1945, the British liberation of Singapore and Malaya began. Having already received the Japanese surrender of Singapore the previous evening, the British began to disembark troops in a carefully planned amphibious operation (codenamed ZIPPER) with no opposition and brought to an end just over three-and-a-half years of brutal Japanese occupation. Amongst the initial wave of British troops to land in Singapore was Esler Dening, a Foreign Office official who had spent the war attached to South-East Asia Command (SEAC) as Chief Political Adviser to Admiral Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia (SACSEA). Dening arrived in the colony by flying boat on 10 September to undertake preparations for the official surrender of all Japanese personnel in South-East Asia to Mountbatten, scheduled to take place two days later. Dening took the time to record his observations of the colony in the immediate aftermath of re-occupation and sent a report back to London.

> Damage was nil where I walked, and the streets were full of people – mainly Chinese, with a sprinkling of POW and internees – but no shops were open. I was stopped by a young Chinese who had his wife and two children with him. He said he was unemployed and starving, because the Japanese currency was no good and he had no other … The other vexed question is that of consumer goods. There don't seem to be any of these anywhere in the world, as far as I can make out, but we must get distribution going again. Food is a present problem, but not, I should say, as great as in Europe, and once we can get the surplus rice circulating, we should be able to meet the emergency. But the farmer won't grow surpluses if he can buy nothing in return, so we get back to consumer goods again.[1]

Dening's comments highlight two of the issues that would plague British efforts to rehabilitate South-East Asia after the Second World War, the shortage of food and the necessary consumer goods required to get the rice market moving again. The restoration of the South-East Asian rice trade became a central component of Britain's efforts to restore their colonial authority in the region. It allowed Britain to reassert and extend their imperial control through humanitarian

[1] F 7659/7659/61, Esler Dening to Sterndale Bennett, 24 September 1945, FO 371/46415, The National Archives [hereafter abbreviated as TNA], pp.2-3.

means, displaying to local populations their commitment to repairing the damage of the Japanese occupation and going some way to restoring British prestige.

The Japanese occupation of South-East Asia during the Second World War had a catastrophic effect on the region. Recent estimates show that over four million South-East Asian civilians died during the occupation, a figure greater than Japanese military casualties for the entire conflict. More than two-thirds of these civilian deaths were caused by famines in 1944-45 as the war entered its final stages and the disruptive implications of Japanese military rule on the region's economic networks became starker, continuing long after the war ended.[2]

Since the late 1930s, the Japanese had envisioned building some form of economic empire in Asia, which they would come to refer to as the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'.[3] This term was a euphemism. Three-and-a-half years of Japanese domination did not bring 'co-prosperity' to Asia. It was intended to enable Japan to exploit the region's natural resources, sending them back to the home islands whilst also opening up South-East Asia as a market for Japanese goods. The Japanese invasion of South-East Asia was driven by a need for natural resources, namely oil, to maintain its war with China which had begun in July 1937. This drive brought Japan into direct conflict with the Western powers who, through colonial rule dating back to the nineteenth century (or even the 1600s in the case of the Dutch in Indonesia) were in possession of territories which produced the materials Japan needed. On the same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces invaded British Malaya, Siam (now Thailand), and the Philippines. This initiated a rapid conquest of South-East Asia which would finally end with the region fully under Japanese control in May 1942.[4] Within six months, the Western imperial powers had been removed. The Japanese occupied British (Malaya, Singapore, Borneo, and

[2] G. Huff, *World War II And Southeast Asia*: *Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.1,4.
[3] This term was coined by Hachirō Arita, Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, in June 1940.
[4] P. Kratoska and K. Goto, 'The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941-1945' in Richard J.B. Bosworth and Joseph A. Maiolo (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War Volume III: Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance and Liberation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp.533-534.

Burma), Dutch (the Netherlands East Indies), and American (The Philippines) colonies and began establishing an empire of their own.

Both the speed and scale of expansion into South-East Asia, however, overstretched Japan. Engaged in an ocean-wide war with the United States in the Pacific, it did not possess enough shipping to enable trade between Japan and South-East Asia, let alone maintain the region's interconnected economies. This situation was made worse by the American submarine and bombing campaign which, by the end of 1944, had reduced Japan's shipping tonnage to one-third of its pre-war figure.[5] To overcome this, Japanese military authorities in South-East Asia adapted their policies. No longer able to maintain food imports, the idea of an interconnected economic union in South-East Asia was supplanted by attempts to foster self-sufficiency in the individual territories.

This transition to autarky had adverse effects on the region's food supply. Despite being the region's staple food stuff, the production of rice drastically fell during Japanese occupation. Rice growers, no longer able to sell for export, stopped growing surplus crops as doing so became unprofitable. Two out of the three largest rice producers saw a decline in yields. In Burma, yearly figures declined from 6.6 million tons grown in 1940 to 2.6 million tons at the end of the war. In French Indochina, rice yields in the main agricultural region of Cochinchina fell from an average annual total of 6.5 million tons to 4.49 million tons over the same period. One exception to this decline was Siam, the region's other great rice grower. Siamese rice production remained consistently high and had in fact risen from 4.6 million tons in 1940 to 4.9 million tons in 1945.[6] Whereas both Burma and French Indochina were occupied by Japan and administered by puppet governments, Siam had been able to retain its autonomy within Japan's

[5] United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *The War against Japanese Transportation 1941-1945,* (Washington, DC: Transportation Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, 1947), p.118, cited in Huff, *World War II and Southeast Asia*, p.42.
[6] Kratoska, 'The Impact of the Second World War on Commercial Rice Production in Mainland South-East Asia' in Paul Kratoska (ed.), *Food Supplies and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p.21.

economic empire. In December 1941 the Siamese Government agreed to allow the Japanese military free passage through their country in exchange for independence. The increase in Siamese rice production, however, was not enough to offset the falls in yield in both Burma and French Indochina and hence prevent famine conditions in the region. In the French Indochinese provinces of Annam and Tonkin, 1 million people were estimated to have starved to death between May 1944 and the end of 1945. Over a similar period, an estimated 2.4 million excess deaths occurred in Japanese-occupied Java, which has been attributed to a decline in food supply.[7]

In British Malaya, the situation was drastically different. Despite the fact that Malaya was heavily reliant on rice imports from other areas of South-East Asia, producing only 35 per cent of its own rice supply, it did not suffer the same mass starvation as occurred in French Indochina or excess deaths such as in Java. So why this disparity? Firstly, the British were in the position to immediately restore some semblance of authority in Malaya. Unlike French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, Malaya did not undergo a period of bloody conflict between nationalists and the returning colonial powers in the months following the Japanese surrender. Secondly, the British had a compelling mixture of political, strategic, and economic incentives for averting famine. Having re-occupied the region after the Japanese surrender, they were faced with the task of restoring regional food supplies to assist the economic rehabilitation of South-East Asia and ensure that mass starvation on the scale seen during the Second World War did not happen again.

Adding further complications to this task was the growth of South-East Asian nationalism. Whilst local nationalist movements had existed before the Second World War, the Japanese occupation of the region had provided a political moment for them to foment. The failure of the

[7] Huff, 'Causes and Consequences of the Great Vietnam Famine, 1944-5', *Economic History Review,* 72:1, 2019, p.286; P. van der Eng, 'Food Supply in Java during War and Decolonisation, 1940-1950', *MPRA Paper No. 8852,* (https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/8852 [date accessed, 8 October 2021]), p.38.

imperial powers to defend their colonial territories and the speed with which Japan was able to conquer shattered any illusion of Western superiority in the minds of South-East Asian populations. Following the end of the war and the liberation of South-East Asia, the British had to contend with these nationalist groups. British methods for dealing with nationalism varied from territory to territory, ranging from outright armed conflict to close co-operation, and was often guided by the pragmatism of achieving the best possible outcome for British interests in the region.

The end of the Second World War was a key moment for British foreign policy in the twentieth century. Despite emerging from the conflict as a victor, British power had declined relative to that of its two main allies, the United States and the Soviet Union. Britain was heavily indebted to the United States for the materiel support received under the terms of the Lend-Lease agreement. Furthermore, it was beginning to lose its empire. The war with Japan had especially exacerbated existing concerns regarding the sustainability of British imperialism in the post-war world. Britain's initial failure to defend its colonial territories in South-East Asia and the subsequent damage wrought on them by the war and the Japanese occupation had done untold harm to British imperial prestige in the region. In the eyes of British policy-makers, the reassertion of imperial rule offered a way to halt the apparent decline in British power.

This thesis examines some of the methods pursued by those British policy-makers to re-establish their South-East Asian empire in the immediate post-war period. It does so through a detailed examination of its food policies and the sometimes-desperate struggle to ensure the populations of nations and colonies in South-East Asia were sufficiently fed. It suggests that Britain attempted to rebuild its empire through the projection of a benevolent interpretation of British imperialism. A government white paper from 1948 defined British colonial policy as 'simple', declaring that its central purpose was 'to guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth in conditions that ensure to the people concerned

both a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression from any quarter.'[8] This policy was expressed through constitutional and economic development policies within British territories and attempts to foster constructive relationships with indigenous nationalist groups. This benevolent interpretation of British imperialism had multiple applications. It was used to justify a continued imperial presence around the world to domestic and international critics of empire, to strengthen arguments about the strategic and economic necessity of empire, and to bolster Britain's status as a great power. Empire remained intrinsically linked to British assumptions about global power and British policy-makers did all they could to uphold it after the Second World War. In South-East Asia, their efforts took the form of food security and famine relief policies. Faced with a global cereal shortage, the British took control of regional rice supplies in an attempt to keep the region fed. In doing so, they gave practical expression to the new benevolent direction of their colonial policy as they attempted to restore their prestige, reassert their imperial rule and regain the benefits of control over South-East Asia's economic resources.

Furthermore, South-East Asia was also region of the world where British interests converged with those of the United States. The Americans became wary of possible Communist expansion into the region. The British, because of their wartime operations against Japan, were in the perfect position to offer their assistance, recognising the opportunity to strengthen their relationship with the United States. The post-war food shortage gave the British the opportunity to display to the Americans that they could manage the region on their behalf through a humanitarian approach to imperial rule that would simultaneously satisfy American anti-colonial sentiments.

Methodology and Sources

This thesis explores British policy-making in South-East Asia from a series of varying perspectives. It is, centrally, a work of imperial history with a focus on British government

[8] *The Colonial Empire (1947-1948)*, Cmd. 7433, (London: HMSO, 1948), p.1.

policy. It seeks, however, to contextualise British food security policy in South-East Asia within wider British foreign policy, exploring how the pressures of Britain's post-war economic difficulties, the fear of Soviet expansion and need for American support all influenced Britain's efforts to prevent famine in Malaya and Singapore. This thesis examines the discourse within the British state regarding Britain's post-war role in South-East Asia, attempting to unpick the contradictions in the Labour's Government's colonial policies. It does so through a close reading of government documents, displaying the various (and often competing) views of different departments in Whitehall and the individual policy-makers themselves. While this thesis is about food security in South-East Asia, it uses this as a prism through which to analyse the changing nature of British power after the Second World War. A high political approach is therefore crucial to understand how that power was conceptualised and deployed by those responsible for making key decisions. It does not cover the whole period of the Attlee Government but rather begins at the end of the Second World War in August 1945, less than one month after Labour had won a majority government, and draws to a close at the end of 1948. At this point, the South-East Asian rice shortage was all but over, and British were re-evaluating their regional policy because they were now fighting a counter-insurgency against communist rebels in Malaya.

This thesis primarily draws from research into official British government documents, particularly those of the Foreign Office (FO), Colonial Office (CO) and the Cabinet Office (CAB), all held by the National Archives. These include the papers of relevant Cabinet committees, including both the Ministerial (FEM) and Official (FEO) Far Eastern Committees, as well as Overseas Reconstruction (ORC), and South-East Asia Food Supply (SEAF). This thesis also made use of the records of British government bodies which operated in South-East Asia such as the wartime military establishment, South-East Asia Command (SEAC) and its civilian successor, the Office for the Special Commissioner (Commissioner-General from

March 1948) for South-East Asia. Papers produced by the Burma Office and the colonial government of Burma, held as part of the India Office collection at the British Library, were also consulted. I used Hansard to examine parliamentary debates on both foreign and colonial policy which are accessible online.[9] Official published collections of primary documents were used to complement archival research, including both volumes of Hugh Tinker's *Burma – The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948*.[10] I made use of the works produced by *British Documents on the End of Empire Project* (BDEEP), published by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in partnership with the British Government, which are available online.[11] To offer an American perspective, I used the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series, available online through the State Department Office of the Historian website.[12] Newspapers published in Malaya and Singapore were consulted to gain a sense of how British famine relief policy was being experienced by its intended recipients. These are also available online through the National Library Board of Singapore digital newspaper archive.[13] For ease of the reader and to maintain consistency with the source material, I have referred to countries by the names by which British policy-makers would have referred to them instead of their modern day names, for example, Siam instead of Thailand and Burma instead of Myanmar.

[9] UK Parliament, Hansard, https://hansard.parliament.uk/

[10] H. Tinker, *Burma: The Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948 – Volume 1: From Military Occupation to Civil Government, 1 January 1944 to 31 August 1946*, (London: HMSO, 1983); *Volume 2: From General Strike to Independence, 31 August 1946 to 4 January 1948*, (London: HMSO, 1984).

[11] Institute of Commonwealth Studies/School of Advanced Study, University of London, British Documents on the End of Empire, https://bdeep.org/.The British Documents on the End of Empire Project was established in 1987. This thesis has made use of three series within the project – R. Hyam (ed.) *The Labour Government and the End of Empire 1945-1951, Vols. 1-4* (London: HMSO, 1992); S.R. Ashton and S.E. Stockwell (eds.), *Imperial Policy and Colonial Practice 1925-1945, Vol. 1-2*, (London: HMSO, 1996); A.J. Stockwell (ed.) *Malaya, Vols.1-2*. (London: HMSO, 1995).

[12] United States Department of State Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, https://history.state.gov/. Volumes relating to the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman administrations were consulted.

[13] National Library Board, Singapore, Newspaper SG, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers

The Post-War British Empire

The historiography of British imperial policy after the Second World War has tended to focus on the process of decolonisation.[14] The decolonisation of the British Empire was not, however, an immediate consequence of the war. If anything, the British imperial mission was reinvigorated by the conflict. In the first few years following the end of the war the British sought to reassert their control over their colonial territories, undertaking what Donald Low and John Lonsdale have described as 'a second colonial occupation' in both Africa and Asia.[15] This return to empire was driven by two metropolitan concerns: to develop profitable colonial natural resources to assist Britain's post-war financial recovery, and, given the close association between the Empire and Britain's status as a global power, to maintain some form of international influence. To do this, the British projected their colonial policies in terms of rehabilitation and development, arguing that a continued period of British rule was necessary to help the colonies themselves recover from the ravages of the Second World War. This was especially relevant in South-East Asia, where British colonies had been under brutal Japanese occupation.

This thesis examines British attempts to rebuild and secure its South-East Asian empire in the aftermath of the Second World War. With Indian independence imminent, South-East Asia became increasingly important in British imperial thinking, especially Malaya with its abundance of dollar-earning natural resources and Singapore because of its centrality in Britain's imperial defence strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. British interests in South-East Asia were superintended by various government departments. The Colonial Office directly governed British policy in Malaya, with the Burma Office performing the same role in Burma.

[14] For example, A.N. Porter and A.J. Stockwell, *British Imperial Policy and Decolonisation 1938-1964: Volume 1 – 1938-1951*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); J. Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation 1918-1968*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[15] D. Low and J. Lonsdale, 'Introduction: Towards a New World Order, 1945-1963' in David Low and Alison Smith (eds.), *The Oxford History of East Africa: Volume III*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.12.

The Foreign Office were responsible for British relations with Siam, the only independent state in South-East Asia, and the other European colonial territories of French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. The Treasury, naturally, took an interest in Britain's regional economic interests and, by virtue of the war against Japan, the War Office also played an important role in regional administration. This thesis suggests that the Labour Government sought to rebuild British prestige throughout South-East Asia by the projection of what it claimed was benevolent British imperialism to secure control over the Malay peninsula and maintain its financial and strategic benefits.

At the end of the Second World War, the British Empire still covered a significant portion of the globe including the self-governing Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; pre-partition India; African territories such as Kenya, Nigeria and the Gold Coast; as well as mandates and protectorates in the Middle East such as Palestine and Aden. In South-East Asia, the liberation of both Burma and Malaya, British colonies invaded by the Japanese in 1941-42, saw those colonies brought back into the imperial orbit and British regional authority would be extended beyond its own territories by post-war military occupation duties in Siam (present day Thailand), French Indochina (today, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia). It was also in Asia, however, that Britain's post-war retreat from empire would also begin. India became independent in August 1947, swiftly followed by Burma, as a republic outside of the Commonwealth, in January 1948. In Malaya, a state-of-emergency was declared in June 1948 as British military forces conducted counter-insurgency operations against communist guerrillas which would last until 1960.

British decolonisation after the Second World War has been attributed to a variety of factors. Early works, often written by the policy-makers themselves, sought to project decolonisation as a display of the ultimate success of colonial policy rather than as evidence of British decline. Harold Macmillan (Conservative Prime Minister from 1957-63), writing in

1972 about the process of British decolonisation since the end of the Second World War, argued that the British had not 'abandoned their Empire in a fit of frivolity or impatience' but rather had recognised 'their duty to spread to other nations those advantages which they had won for themselves.'[16] This idea that the British Empire had built into its political structure a long-term plan for withdrawal from the outset – referred to by John Darwin as 'planned obsolescence' – as soon as it was felt that certain colonies were capable of self-governance allowed for the British to show themselves as an imperial power still in control of all its faculties.[17] In this interpretation, decolonisation was something that would take place on terms set by London and London alone. This argument gained primacy during the Vietnam War, itself a legacy of the French colonial withdrawal from Indochina in the mid-1950s. Compared to the French experience of decolonisation, which involved fighting and ultimately losing bloody colonial wars of independence against nationalist groups in both Indochina and Algeria, Britain's retreat from empire appeared far more orderly and far less costly.

As official government records became publicly accessible, the 1970s and 1980s saw a range of original and sophisticated historical works produced on British decolonisation. These works broadened the field by placing the British Empire in its international context, although because of the available source material, their scope was still limited to the perspective of metropolitan high politics. In the early 1980s, John Gallagher argued that seeking a monocausal explanation for British decolonisation has often led historians to the convenient conclusion that it was the damage of the Second World War itself that caused British imperial decline.[18] A longer-term explanation for decolonisation was required, he argued, which incorporated the effects of European rivalries in the late nineteenth century, the First World War, and the

[16] H. Macmillan, *Pointing the Way 1959-1961*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972), pp.116-117.
[17] Darwin, 'Decolonisation and the End of Empire' in Robin Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V – Historiography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.545.
[18] J. Gallagher, 'The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire' in Anil Seal (ed.) *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and Other Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.73.

international crises of the 1920s and 1930s into the narrative. Across this timeframe, the close interplay of three factors – Great Power rivalry, domestic political pressures, and the changing dynamics of collaborative relationships with colonial societies – all contributed to British decolonisation. The same factors that had encouraged British overseas imperial expansion in the previous century were now seen, conversely, to be contributing to its decline. While all three of these factors had influential roles in bringing about the end of the British Empire, in Gallagher's analysis none gained primacy. To achieve a more complete picture of British decolonisation, any future interpretation would need to seek some synthesis of these factors.[19]

Gallagher, however, did not go far beyond 1945 in exploring the reasons for British decolonisation. In 1985, R.F. Holland built upon Gallagher's multicausal explanation, carrying this interpretation beyond the end of the Second World War. Holland offered a comparative study of European decolonisation, testing Gallagher's triangular model for British decolonisation against the experiences of the French, Belgian, Dutch and Portuguese empires in the post-war period. While recognising that international and domestic political developments created a set of circumstances in which decolonisation was increasingly likely, Holland argued that the real impetus for decolonisation came from a change in the dynamics of the relationship between metropole and colony.[20] British economic and strategic priorities were reorientated in the early Cold War, contributing to a breakdown in the formerly collaborative relationship between coloniser and colonised. Faced with financing a domestic nationalisation programme and the defence spending required to balance against the growing military threat of the Soviet Union, the cost of upholding a global empire became too much of a burden for the British to bear. At the colonial level, governments and societies recognised the inability of the metropole to provide for their defence and so sought new patrons, with the two superpowers of

[19] Gallagher, 'The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire', p.74.
[20] R.F. Holland, *European Decolonisation 1918-1981: An Introductory Survey*, (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1985), pp.299-302.

the United States and Soviet Union offering the most likely chance of support. For Holland, the simultaneous development of what he refers to as a mutual feeling of 'disimperialism' in London and its colonial territories offered the best explanation for post-war decolonisation because it created a situation in which both the colonial power and their colonies were attempting to escape from one another.[21] In their search for a multicausal explanation of British decolonisation, both Gallagher and Holland have underplayed the impact of the Second World War. While the dissolution of the British Empire was not an immediate consequence of the conflict, it created a set of circumstances in which decolonisation was increasingly likely. The post-war shift in British imperial policy to focus on development and its supposed goal of ultimate independence for Britain's colonies ensured that the empire, despite a short-term reimposition of imperial rule, was living on borrowed time.

International Development

The emphasis on development as an important component of decolonisation is a recent trend in the historiography of the British Empire. In the social sciences, development has been traditionally categorised as a distinctly post-war phenomenon, borne out of Cold War tensions, and Western (more specifically American) in its origins. Most works tend to cite President Harry S. Truman's Point Four Program, announced at his inaugural address in 1949, as the first real expression of an overseas development policy.[22] Speaking on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, Truman said that the United States

> must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve

[21] Holland, *European Decolonisation*, p.299.
[22] See A. Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp.3-4 and G. Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origin to Global Faith*, (London: Zed Books, 2008), pp.70-72 for two notable examples.

> suffering of these people … The old imperialism - exploitation for foreign profit - has no place in our plans.[23]

Here, it is worth recognising that development is a freighted term. It can imply the existence of a hierarchy of nations, with some countries being ranked as more advanced and hence others being perceived as in need of advancement.

It is also important to recognise the colonial origins of international development policy which predate the Cold War. It was the European imperial powers which gave early impetus to the idea that certain areas of the world were 'underdeveloped' and hence required assistance to advance them. Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton have drawn attention to the intellectual origins of development theory in nineteenth-century Europe, outlining the influence of philosophers such as Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) on British policy in India, Canada, and Australia.[24] Britain began an official programme of state investment in its colonies, with Parliament passing the Colonial Development Act in 1929. The act set aside an annual budget of £1 million, allowing for British colonial governments to submit plans to London for industrial and agricultural development schemes in their respective territories. Ultimate decisions on how this money was allocated, however, rested with the Treasury and Colonial Office. Building on this, Stephen Constantine has highlighted that the tension inherent in British colonial development policy was already apparent in these early years, arguing that the 1929 act was never about developing colonial economies but rather exploiting colonial natural resources to increase domestic industrial production.[25]

Despite this early initiative, the real transformative moment for British colonial development policy was the Second World War. During the conflict the 1929 act was amended twice, in 1940 and again in 1945, becoming the Colonial Development and Welfare Act. The

[23] President Harry S. Truman's Presidential Address, 20 January 1949, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address [date accessed 16 August 2023].
[24] M.P. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.3-59; 173-253.
[25] S. Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy 1914-1940*, (London: Frank Cass, 1984), pp.195-196.

1940 amendment increased the capital for investment in the colonies up to £5 million a year with a further £500,000 to fund research. In 1945, the budget increased further, with a total of £120 million pounds being made available each year. Constantine remained critical of British development policy, suggesting that its expansion was 'a defensive operation' intended 'to provide a new justification which would legitimise the perpetuation of colonial rule.'[26] In a similar vein, the French established the Investment Fund for the Economic and Social Development of the Overseas Territories (*Fonds d'Investissements pour le Développement Économique et Social des Territoires d'Outre-mer* – FIDES) in 1946. From 1946 to 1959, the French invested over 600 billion old francs into social and economic development schemes in their colonies in sub-Saharan Africa through FIDES.[27] Gerard Bossuat has argued that much like its British equivalent, French development aid was not so much about development as it was about defining the donor's place in the post-war world, describing FIDES as 'another manifestation of France's traditional role as a world power.'[28] In his comparative study of post-war British, French and Dutch development policy, Nicholas White has also shed light on the importance of colonial natural resources in the efforts of the European powers to revive their economies in the aftermath of the war. In the case of Britain, White argues that development policy was 'hopelessly optimistic, ignorant of local conditions, and downright exploitative.'[29]

In trying to understand these post-war British colonial development policies, the majority of the historiography has focused on Britain's African colonies in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[30] These works tend to explore specific examples of development plans such as the

[26] Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy*, pp. 259-260.
[27] G. Bossuat, 'French Development Aid and Co-operation under de Gaulle', *Contemporary European History*, 12:4, 2003, p.435.
[28] Bossuat, 'French Development Aid', p.455.
[29] N.J. White, 'Reconstructing Europe though Rejuvenating Empire: the British, French, and Dutch Experiences Compared', *Past and Present*, Supplement 6, 2011, p.228.
[30] For examples of works related to British post-war development policy in Africa see R. Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy 1938-1948*, (London: Routledge, 1982); P. Kelemen, 'Planning for Africa: The British Labour Party's Colonial Development Policy, 1920-1964', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 7:1, 2007, pp.76-98; C.L. Riley, ''Tropical Allsorts': The Transnational Flavour of British Development Policies in Africa', *Journal of World History*, 26:4, 2015, pp.839-864.

notorious failure of the East African groundnuts scheme. Beginning in 1947, the Labour Government used British taxpayers' money to assist in the cultivation of peanuts for export in Tanganyika to produce edible oils and reduce demands of rationing in Britain. The scheme was a total disaster in large part because the local environment was totally unsuited to meet the yields required by Britain to make such a scheme profitable. Most of these texts explore the technical aspects of such schemes and analyse the reasons behind their successes and failures.[31] There is relatively little on how development policy was carried out in South-East Asia. White, for example, analyses the problems of development policy in Malaya and suggests that for all the emphasis placed by the Labour Government on improving the production of Malayan rubber and tin, development policy there remained distinctly agrarian in focus. The post-war colonial state refused to become involved with the rubber and tin companies, the majority of which were British private enterprises.[32] White, however, alludes to the wider importance of colonial development in Britain's South-East Asia policy, interpreting it as part of a 'hearts and minds battle' to win the support of a colonial population that had been radicalised by the experience of the Second World War.[33] This rhetorical element is a recurring theme in this thesis. I argue that the Labour Government sought to cultivate a positive image of British imperialism through the provision of food in South-East Asia to better manage resources, repair damage done by the war, and project a positive image of British power.

Development and developmental aid policy have been subject to neo-colonialist critiques. Ronald Robinson, in his article 'Imperial Theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire' suggests that foreign aid can be interpreted as an example of extended imperialism. Robinson

[31] Texts specifically related to the failure of the groundnuts scheme include A. Coulson, 'Agricultural Policies in Mainland Tanzania', *Review of African Political Economy,* 10, 1977, pp.74-100; J.S. Hogendorn and K.M. Scott, 'The East African Groundnut Scheme: Lessons of a Large-Scale Agricultural Failure', *African Economic History*, 10, 1981, pp.81-115.
[32] White, 'The Frustration of Development: British Business and the Late Colonial State in Malaya, 1945-1957', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28:1, 1997, p.119
[33] White, 'The Frustrations of Development', p.103.

states that aid is an intensely competitive sphere in international relations, describing it as a marketplace in which the recipients of aid have 'a choice of creditors'.[34] As such, aid-giving became a competition amongst the developed powers 'for the hearts and minds, not the economic resources' of what today we could call the 'Global South'.[35] This thesis, however, contends that, in the case of British development and aid policy in South-East Asia, these two objectives were not mutually exclusive.

Recent work by Charlotte Lydia Riley has highlighted the centrality of colonial development policy to the Attlee Labour Government's effort to restore the British Empire after the Second World War. While acknowledging the hierarchical interpretation of development, Riley argues that Labour's post-war policy should not be dismissed as 'paternalistic, racist and exploitative' as it was, in fact, motivated by 'genuine desire to improve conditions within the empire, not out of a patronising assumption of metropolitan superiority, but because of a detailed understanding of the prior failings of the British colonial state'[36] This thesis seeks to build on Riley's interpretations, transposing and testing this analysis of Labour colonial policy in a South-East Asian context. Whilst recognising that there was an element of genuine altruism behind Labour's approach to colonial policy, the thesis argues that relieving famine in South-East Asia was ultimately undertaken in Britain's national interest, serving to alleviate the strategic, economic and political concerns of the new Labour Government in the early Cold War.

Humanitarianism and Famine Relief

As previously suggested, humanitarian aid is closely connected to theories of development and development policy, but the historical study of humanitarianism is a relatively

[34] R. Robinson, 'Imperial theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12:2, 1984, p.51.
[35] Robinson, 'Imperial theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire', p.51.
[36] C.L. Riley, 'Monstrous Predatory Vampires and Beneficent Fairy-Godmothers: British Post-War Colonial Development in Africa', (Unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2013), pp.14-15.

recent phenomenon. Scholars often cite Michael Barnett's 2011 work *Empire of Humanity* as the first real attempt to investigate humanitarianism from a historical perspective.[37] Barnett, a political scientist, argues that the end of the Second World War was a pivotal moment for the humanitarian movement, ushering in an era of what he describes as 'neo-humanitarianism.' The effects of the Second World War, decolonisation, and the Cold War combined to create 'a new space for imagining new kinds of commitments to the welfare of more populations' which was 'overlaid by superpowers striving to harness humanitarian action in their interests.[38] Despite describing the post-war period as 'neo-humanitarian', Barnett argues that it actually differed little in practice from the previous era of what he terms 'imperial humanitarianism'. Neo-humanitarianism was similarly paternalistic, serving to reinforce systems of colonial dominance. Exercised through the deployment of 'expert knowledge' from the metropole and packaged in 'quasi-technocratic language' to justify intervention, neo-humanitarianism remained a top-down structure. It was 'something done for and to others, not with them.'[39]

The specific relationship between the British Empire and humanitarianism has been the subject of historical enquiry. In 2012 a special issue of *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* was dedicated to the topic. In their editorial preface, Emily Baughan and Bronwen Everill highlight how close study of this relationship reveals that British humanitarianism, far from than being 'non-political and impartial,' in fact 'underpinned British imperial power by enhancing an image of the empire as a force for universal good'.[40] Such an interpretation raises question as to the motives of overseas aid policy, suggesting that the British government did not undertake humanitarian work solely in the interests of the intended recipients. In their introduction to that same special issue, Rob Skinner and Alan Lester stress

[37] See, for example, R. Skinner and A. Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas', *JICH*, 40:5, 2012, pp.730-731.
[38] M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*¸ (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp.29-31.
[39] Barnett, *Empire of Humanity,* p.105.
[40] E. Baughan and B. Everill, 'Empire and Humanitarianism: A Preface', *JICH*, 40:5, 2012, p.727.

how the histories of humanitarianism and imperialism are 'intertwined' empirically and conceptually, stating that 'the origins and development of humanitarianism depended on a relationship with imperial networks, ideologies and anxieties'.[41] The authors call, however, for a widening of this history, suggesting that the historical study of humanitarianism has in itself been top-down, failing to address both the role of anti-colonial nationalism and the challenges it posed to imperial authority in the post-war era as well as the connection between humanitarianism and development policy.[42] This thesis attempts to redress this and explores how external actors, such as an independent Siamese government and Indonesian nationalists among others, shaped British famine relief policy.

Barnett suggests that a crucial element of the post-war neo-humanitarian era was the expanded role of the state as an agent of aid-giving.[43] This focus on the state has been complemented by investigations into the actions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the process of aid-giving in the British Empire.[44] These studies tend to devote themselves to the work of individual charities such as Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund (SCF) among others. Baughan's analysis of SCF, for example, reveals that NGOs were far from politically neutral. The requirements of the British colonial state pervaded the work of SCF in Kenya, where the charity became a key component of British counter-insurgency during the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s, providing 'rehabilitation' for convicted Kikuyu youths. The case of SCF shows how humanitarian messages can be co-opted by the state, enabling the preservation of colonial power.[45] This thesis also examines the role of the state in humanitarian aid. Rather than focus on the ways in which the state used external agencies, however, it seeks to re-centre the state

[41] Skinner and Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire', p.740.
[42] Skinner and Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire', p.742.
[43] Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p.104.
[44] See M. Hilton, 'Charity and the End of Empire: British Non-Governmental Organisations, Africa and International Development in the 1960s', *American Historical Review*, 123:2, 2018, pp.493-517; A. Bocking-Welch, *British Civic Society at the End of Empire: Decolonisation, Globalisation and International Responsibility*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
[45] Baughan, 'Rehabilitating an Empire: Humanitarian Collusion with the Colonial State during the Kenyan Emergency, ca.1954-60', *Journal of British Studies*, 59:1, 2020, p.58.

as the primary agent of aid-giving in the immediate post-war era. It interrogates the way in which the British state was able to position itself as a broker for food aid in South-East Asia and how the provision of famine relief was used to justify a continued British imperial presence in that region.

Tehila Sasson and James Vernon have argued that there exists 'a particularly British way' of practising famine relief which evolved from the experience of managing famines within the British Empire in the nineteenth century, notably in Ireland and India. British famine relief policies were the products of 'the need to govern colonial populations' and not the development of a genuine humanitarian sentiment or new humanitarian subject.[46] This way did not remain 'British' for long, and the authors draw on the work of Jessica Reinisch and her study of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to show how British expertise, acquired in colonial settings, was appropriated and internationalised after the Second World War.[47] Indeed, the weaponization of food aid to achieve political goals was not something confined solely to the British. Nick Cullather has highlighted how, in the West versus East battle of the Cold War, food aid became an important feature of American efforts to contain the spread of communism in Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Taiwan.[48]

The British also recognised the importance of food supply in the emerging Asian Cold War. Previous historiography of British famine relief in South-East Asia has tended to deal with it as a matter of international relations, focusing on attempts to secure rice supplies from Siam and French Indochina or as part of Britain's attempt to reassert its authority in South-East

[46] T. Sasson and J. Vernon, 'Practising the British Way of Famine Relief: Technologies of Relief, 1770-1985', *European Review of History*, 22:6, 2015, p.860.
[47] Sasson and Vernon, p.866; See J. Reinisch, 'Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA, *Past & Present*, Supplement 6, 2011, pp.258-289.
[48] See N. Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Asia.[49] This thesis seeks to build on these interpretations with a wider frame of analysis. It aims to show what famine relief meant for British colonialism in the post-war period, connecting the different colonies and nations in a study of international diplomacy, humanitarianism, and development policy to argue that all three intersected in the redefinition and attempted reassertion of British colonial power. Indeed, Tilman Remme has argued that the collaborative nature of British food security policy laid the foundations for a regionalist approach to British policy-making in South-East Asia.[50] This was not, however, the ultimate goal of British policy which was intended to restore British authority in South-East Asia. In order to acquire enough rice for Malaya and Singapore, the British were forced to acquiesce to the demands to local nationalist actors which ultimately worked to erode British authority in South-East Asia. Reasserting themselves by emphasising humanitarianism was therefore self-defeating and contributed to Britain's regional decline. This thesis contributes to the literature on colonial development and imperial humanitarianism by highlighting that these connected ideals did not always result in the reimposition of imperial rule. Through exploring food security in post-war South-East Asia, it shows that the policy could sometimes have the opposite effect and, in this case, worked to hasten Britain's retreat from empire.

Structure

This thesis can be divided in to two parts. The first section, Chapters 1 and 2, establish the context in which British food aid policy was undertaken in post-war South-East Asia. The first chapter examines British wartime planning for the rehabilitation of South-East Asia and displays how a food aid programme developed as a key part of British policy in the immediate period following the Japanese surrender. The second chapter examines the local and

[49] For example, N. Tarling, 'Rice and Reconciliation: The Anglo-Thai Peace Negotiations of 1945', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 66:2, 1978, pp.59-111; Tarling, 'An Attempt to Fly in the Face of the Ordinary Laws of Supply and Demand: The British and Siamese Rice 1945-7', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 75, 1987, pp.140-186; T.O. Smith, 'Lord Killearn and British Diplomacy Regarding French Indo-Chinese Rice Supplies, 1946-1948, *History*, 96:324, 2011, pp.477-489.

[50] T. Remme, *Britain and Regional Cooperation in South-East Asia, 1945-49*, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.44-53.

international bodies tasked with managing the regional food shortage and Britain's attempt to use them to advance its own interests. It argues that, despite claiming it was acting on behalf of the international community in addressing the South-East Asian rice shortage, Britain saw it as an opportunity to further reinforce its claims that the region needed a continued period of British supervision to recover from the damages of Japanese occupation. From then on, the thesis follows a geographic structure with chapters dedicated to different South-East Asian territories. The third chapter explores British food policy in Malaya and Singapore, such as the creation of communal feeding programmes and attempts to encourage self-sufficiency, and argues that the British expanded the role of the colonial state in providing food supplies for its subjects as a means of reinforcing its control over the two colonies. The fourth chapter focuses on British efforts to procure rice from Siam, commenting on the agency of independent states and Britain's relationship with them. Similarly, the fifth chapter is focused on the British attempt to maintain control over Burmese rice supplies as that territory transitioned from colonial rule to self-government. These two chapters share a common theme, the ability of Britain to influence independent or soon-to-be independent states, and argues that British policy-makers were forced into giving way to the demands of these states in order to acquire enough rice for Malaya and Singapore. The sixth and final chapter is devoted to studying British food policy towards the other European colonies in the region, French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, comparing the differing approaches Britain took in dealing with anti-colonial nationalist movements in those two territories in its attempts to extract rice from them. Despite the variations in British policy towards acquiring and distributing rice throughout South-East Asia, this thesis has identified a common thread between them all, that of a growing British awareness and susceptibility to local developments. By using food supply as a means of reasserting their colonial control, the British inadvertently exposed themselves to the demands of local populations. Their humanitarian efforts, originally intended to restore British regional authority

therefore had the adverse effect, as British policymakers found themselves having to submit to the agency of local stakeholders, weakening their own position, in order to keep Malaya and Singapore sufficiently fed.

1: Origins of British Famine Relief Policy in Post-War Malaya

This chapter sets out to contextualise British food security policy in Malaya within Britain's bid to reimpose its colonial rule in South-East Asia after the Second World War. It does so through an analysis of both official government and Labour Party planning for South-East Asia and situates British efforts to prevent widespread famine in Malaya within a British state that was placing increased emphasis on colonial development and aid to its overseas territories. Immediate British efforts to supply Malaya and Singapore with rice in the aftermath of the Japanese occupation were focused on Siam. Siam was an enemy state of Britain, having declared war on the Allies in January 1942. By examining Britain's attempt to get rice from Siam as reparation for that country's role in the war and subsequent watering down of these demands, this chapter introduces key themes that run through this thesis, namely the increasing sensitivity of British policy-makers to developments on-the-ground in South-East Asia such as the growth of local nationalism as well as Anglo-American relations and Britain's need to retain American support.

British Policy for South-East Asia

Maintaining influence in South-East Asia, particularly upholding authority over the Malay Peninsula, became a central objective of British regional policy for the post-war Labour government. In December 1945, a Foreign Office memorandum outlined the main objectives for British foreign policy in Asia:

a) The security of British territories.
b) The protection and well-being of British and British-protected persons in the area.
c) Good relations between the Governments and the peoples of the British Commonwealth and those of countries with interests in the area.
d) Good relations among all countries with interests in the area.
e) The extension of British economic interests and the protection of British assets in the area.
f) Economic progress throughout the area.
g) Financial stability throughout the area.[1]

[1] F 6208/2191/61, British Foreign Policy in Asia, 31 December 1945, FO 371/54052, TNA, p.3.

Despite these grand aims, the Foreign Office recognised that Britain had to prioritise and opted to reorientate British policy around the rehabilitation of South-East Asia.

> After six years of war in Europe and four in the Pacific, the military and economic strength of the United Kingdom does not permit us to resume at once all our pre-war power, influence and responsibilities throughout the Far East … the major British interests, strategic, political and economic, lie South of the Tropic of Cancer; and above all, in the British Dependencies in the area. It is to these, therefore, that on every ground our limited resources must first be directed … we shall have to solve the political problems which arise there single-handed. It is there, too, that our economic resources must first be concentrated, and that their application will be most effective, both on the spot and as a step towards re-establishing our position throughout the area.[2]

In the eyes of British policy-makers, regional stability was an essential prerequisite for both the political and economic development of South-East Asia. Cultivating stability in South-East Asia became the primary aim of regional British policy after the Second World War.[3] British policy-makers also felt that, given their interests in the region, the best means of achieving this stability was the reimposition of British authority. This would be achieved first through the restoration of British rule in its colonial territories which had been occupied by Japan and then would be spread to others. There appeared to be a circular logic behind this. The restoration of British authority would bring stability to South-East Asia and then that stability would help to preserve British authority.

The quest for stability in South-East Asia also had wider implications for British post-war foreign policy. While the Foreign Office had afforded the region the greatest importance in British policy in Asia, in the grand scheme of things it was neither as important as Europe nor the Middle East. At the same time as attempting the economic rehabilitation of South-East Asia, the British were committed to the Labour Government's domestic programme of nationalisation and the creation of a welfare state. On the European continent, the British were tasked with occupation duties in Germany which also involved managing food shortages as well as dealing with a refugee crisis, all against the backdrop of Soviet expansion in Eastern

[2] F 6208/2191/61, British Foreign Policy in Asia, 31 December 1945, FO 371/54052, TNA, pp.3-4.
[3] Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War 1945-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.5.

Europe. In the Middle East, the British were caught between escalating Arab and Jewish tensions in Palestine. All of these placed a significant and simultaneous strain on Britain's already overstretched resources. Achieving stability in South-East Asia would therefore allow British policy-makers to divert their energy and resources to resolving more pressing issues, especially those closer to home in Europe.

The other great factor affecting British foreign policy-making was its relationship with the United States. Britain had emerged from the Second World War as the lesser partner in the transatlantic relationship and was dependent on American financial support. The war with Japan had brought Anglo-American tensions to a head. The Roosevelt administrations anti-colonial pronouncements conflicted with Britain's desire first to reclaim the colonial territory it had lost to the Japanese, and second, to reassert itself as an imperial power in that region post-war. In this regard, Christopher Thorne has argued that the wartime Anglo-American alliance was 'an uneasy partnership.'[4] Nevertheless, the Foreign Office believed that the United States could be a useful partner for British policy in South-East Asia and stressed that the Americans shared an interest with Britain in the 'peace, settled conditions and economic progress' of the region.[5] Britain's post-war emphasis on humanitarian and developmental imperial policies then appears to have been designed to lessen these criticisms and maintain American support after the war.

The dire nature of Britan's post-war finances gives some context as to why British policy-makers were so keen to see their authority re-established in South-East Asia. Britain ran up huge debts both to the United States, under various loan agreements and the Lend-Lease scheme, and to the colonies in the shape of the sterling balances (effectively an endless series of promissory notes written out to the colonial governments) to finance its war effort. The sterling balances and American financial aid had enabled Britain to spend over an estimated £2,100

[4] C. Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan 1941-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.405
[5] F 6208/2191/61, British Foreign Policy in Asia, 31 December 1945, FO 371/54052, TNA, p.56.

million above its annual income in 1945. During the course of the conflict Britain had accumulated debts to its colonial empire totalling £454 million.[6] With American support abruptly withdrawn with little warning after the cessation of the war against Japan, this imbalance of payments left Britain facing, in the words of John Maynard Keynes, the Government's financial advisor, 'a financial Dunkirk.'[7] Both Malaya and Singapore therefore took on greater importance to Britain after the Second World War. Malaya's abundance of the dollar-earning natural resources of rubber and tin were vital to Britain's post-war economic recovery. Malaya was the greatest source of dollars within the Empire. In 1947, for instance, Malayan rubber sales brought in $120 million. Of the 727,000 tons of rubber imported by the United States in 1948, 371,000 came from Malaya. Hence, according to A.J. Stockwell, Malaya was 'too important to lose.'[8] Renewed access to Malaya's wealth in natural resources would allow the British to begin to redress the balance of payments issue, and start to repay the debts owed to both the United States and its colonies.

The British also had a strategic rationale for restoring their authority in Malaya. In terms of imperial grand strategy, the naval base in Singapore was a key feature of Britain's regional defence, a link in the line of communication from London to the Pacific dominions of Australia and New Zealand. The Japanese occupation of European colonial territory across South-East Asia during the Second World War had provided a political moment in which local nationalist movements had fomented.[9] In Malaya, the British had supplied local guerrilla forces such as the communist Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to provide resistance to the Japanese occupation. Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, the British aimed to marginalise these groups and limit their claims for political representation in the post-war

[6] A. Hinds, 'Imperial Policy and Colonial Sterling Balances 1943-1956', *JICH*, 19:1, 1991, p.29.
[7] CP (45) 112, 14 August 1945, CAB 129/1/12, TNA, p.6.
[8] A.J. Stockwell, 'British Imperial Strategy and Decolonisation in Malaya, 1942-1952', *JICH*, 13:1, 1984, p.78.
[9] See J. Pluvier, *South-East Asia from Colonialism to Independence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

governance of the colony.[10] Susan L. Carruthers has argued how the British waged a propaganda campaign to win Malayan hearts and minds in the aftermath of the Second World War through the promotion of positive aspects of British imperial rule to counter an increasing communist influence.[11] The provision of famine relief, therefore, contained an ulterior motive. It was not solely an altruistic act, undertaken to alleviate the risk of starvation but served to demonstrate to the Malayan population that the British state was concerned for their welfare and was committed to aiding them to overcome food shortages. It was an exercise in keeping Malayan's onside politically, and hence that economically and strategically important colony within the orbit of the British Empire.

Underpinning all of these factors, however, was the election of a new Labour Government in July 1945. The Labour Party's colonial policies were profoundly influenced by its close association with the Fabian Colonial Bureau (FCB), co-founded in 1940 by the Labour MP (and future Secretary of State for the Colonies) Arthur Creech Jones and anti-colonialist intellectual Rita Hinden. David Goldsworthy, writing in 1971, described the relationship between Creech Jones and the FCB and its role in shaping Labour colonial policy as 'one of the most remarkable instances of sustained and creative interchange between a minister and a pressure group which recent British history as been able to provide.'[12] A branch of the socialist Fabian Society, the FCB advocated a gradual path to decolonisation. Their approach required a continued period of British trusteeship over the colonies, a period in which economic infrastructure and political systems would be developed before self-government was granted. In 1943, Labour issued a pamphlet outlining the Party's post-war policy for the Empire. Under a Labour government, the pamphlet declared, the British colonies would be administered 'as a trust for the native

[10] M. Thomas, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France and Their Roads from Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.66.
[11] S.L. Carruthers, *Winning Hearts and Minds: British Governments, the Media and Colonial Counter-Insurgency 1944-60*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp.73-74.
[12] D. Goldsworthy, *Colonial Issues in British Politics 1945-1961: From 'Colonial Development' to 'Wind of Change'*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p.144.

inhabitants, the principal object of the administration being the well-being, education and development of those inhabitants.'[13] These aims were reinforced in the Party's 1945 election manifesto which promised the 'planned progress of our Colonial Dependencies' should Labour win the election.[14] Once in power, this message was reiterated further with the publication of another pamphlet, *The Labour Party and the Colonies*, authored by Hinden. Hinden described poverty as 'the keynote' of life within Britain's tropical colonies. 'The whole essence' of British colonial policy 'is to eliminate poverty while helping the colonial peoples towards self-government.' [15]

The FCB paid particular interest to South-East Asia. Writing in *Empire*, the journal of the FCB, in May 1943 Creech Jones called on the wartime government to think more seriously about the future of colonialism in post-war South-East Asia. 'It will not do only to defeat Japan or for Britain to take possession once again and restore regimes interrupted by war … These are all negative policies. What matters more are our positive and constructive proposals for this complex area.'[16] Indeed, prior to the Japanese occupation British rule over Malaya had been a confusing blend of informal and formal imperial control. The territory consisted of nine Malay states (four federated, five unfederated - which still had their own sultan rulers but had signed treaties with Britain guaranteeing their protection) and the three Crown Colonies of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca (which were directly controlled by Britain). To rectify this parochialism, the wartime coalition government formulated a plan for post-war Malaya. From 1943 onwards, civil servants within the War Office's Malayan Planning Unit drew up a plan to reshape British rule over the colony, resulting in the creation of the Malayan Union.[17] The Union would consist

[13] Labour Party, *The Colonies: The Labour Party's Post-War Policy for the African and Pacific Colonies*, (London: Labour Party, 1943), p.1.
[14] Labour Party, *Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation*, (London: Labour Party, 1945), p.11.
[15] R. Hinden, *The Labour Party and the Colonies*, (London: Labour Party, 1946), p.5.
[16] *Empire*, May 1943, p.5.
[17] See C.M. Turnbull, 'British Planning for Post-War Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 5:2, 1975, pp.239-254.

of the nine Malay states, along with Penang and Malacca, which were to be federalised into a single territory with a central government in Kuala Lumpur. Singapore, for reasons of military strategy, was to remain a separate colony. The Labour Government's announcement to the House of Commons on 10 October 1945 of their intention to follow through with the Malayan Union plan was met with approval by Fabian commentators. The FCB interpreted it as an early expression of the Government's commitment to colonial development, offering hope that 'a new spirit will be infused into the relationship between Britain and the colonial peoples' in the future.[18]

It was within this context, reasserting British imperial control over post-war South-East Asia and the reformation of the British imperial state in Malaya, that implementation of the policy to deal with the rice shortage took place. Coupled with the Labour Party's developmental ideology, it offered the Labour Government an opportunity to practice what it preached, strengthening the Party's claims to a more benevolent approach to imperial rule while maintaining the economic and strategic benefits of a British imperial presence in South-East Asia.

The Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty

The British government had been planning for the possibility of food shortages in South-East Asia after the Second World War. As has been discussed, rice production in Burma, Siam, and French Indochina had been disrupted by the war. In November 1943, under the direction of the Foreign Office Relief Department, a working party on relief requirements for British territories in Asia was established. Chaired by Sir Hubert Young, a former colonial governor, the Young Working Party (YWP) completed its report in May 1944. The YWP based its estimates around a standard of 1700 calories per head, an amount it described as 'necessary to meet minimum energy requirements and to prevent disease and unrest.'[19] The report

[18] *Empire*, November/December 1945, p.2.
[19] Far East Relief Requirements – Report of Young Working Party, BT 25/75/SLAMISC6, TNA, p.3.

recommended a daily rice ration of 12 ounces per head with increased allowances made for heavy labourers as well as pregnant and nursing women. The YWP reported that Burma would be capable of sustaining itself from surplus rice stocks accumulated during the Japanese occupation. Malaya, on the other hand, could not. Before the war, Malaya was highly dependent on imported rice from elsewhere in South-East Asia. The YWP calculated that Malaya, in a worst-case scenario, would need to import 206,700 tons of rice in the first three months following liberation. It would require a total of some 900,000 tons of imported rice within the first year to maintain the desired target of 1700 calories per head.[20]

The question of where the British were to source the required rice for Malaya created one of the first policy issues for the new Labour government in South-East Asia. As previously stated, the three largest rice producing states within South-East Asia had been grievously affected by the war. Given the state of South-East Asian rice production, Siam appeared to be the best place to source the rice necessary to prevent famine in Malaya and Singapore. There was, however, a complication: Siam was an enemy state of Britain. In December 1941 Japan invaded Siam, leading to the Siamese administration allying with their invaders. The land-based contingent of Japan's invasion of British Malaya was launched from southern Siam. In January 1942, the Siamese Government itself declared war on Britain and the United States, although this was rejected by the Americans.[21] Because of Siam's status as an enemy nation, the British wartime coalition government had expressed a desire for punitive reparations from Siam once the war was over. Anthony Eden, the coalition government's Foreign Secretary, described Siam's actions in the opening stages of the war as a 'betrayal' of Britain, concluding that the Siamese Government 'must work their passage home' should they wish to restore friendly relations with Britain.[22] In May 1945, the possibility of food shortages in the British colonies

[20] Report of the Young Working Party, BT 25/75/SLAMISC6, TNA, p.242.
[21] See J.E. Williams, 'Siam: A Bone of Contention between Britain and the United States 1942-46', *Review of International Studies*, 8:3, 1982, pp.187-202.
[22] WP (44) 72, 3 February 1944, CAB 66/46/22, TNA, p.1.

in Asia was raised at a meeting of the Cabinet Armistice and Post-War (APW) Committee. George Hall, then the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, produced a memorandum arguing that access to Siamese rice supplies held the key to averting famine in British territories in the Far East.[23] During discussions, the Duke of Devonshire, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, informed the Committee that the Colonial Office were 'particularly anxious' access to Siamese rice be secured as soon as possible. In his hope that Siam 'would not be treated too tenderly', the Duke suggested that rice could perhaps be taken as some form of reparation when a peace settlement with Siam was ultimately reached.[24] There was no firm conclusion made by the APW Committee at this stage. They agreed that whatever policy was ultimately decided upon, it would be necessary to keep the Americans informed.[25]

This line was continued by the Labour Government. Just days after the Japanese surrender, the reconstituted Far Eastern Ministerial Committee met for the first time under the new administration. Chaired by the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, the Ministerial Committee discussed the arrangements for a peace settlement with Siam that had been established by the wartime coalition. The availability of rice from Siam had formed a key part of the settlement drafted by the Ministerial Committee under the previous government. Regarding the post-war rice situation, the Committee reported that Siam was 'a country which is *sui generis* amongst enemies and ex-enemies in possessing ample stocks of a commodity vitally needed' for the relief of liberated territories in South-East Asia.

> Having been deprived during the war of surplus rice from Siam and other rice producing areas in South-East Asia, the Allies have been forced to ship rice at artificially high prices and other cereals from distant sources of supply on uneconomic shipping hauls. It would be equitable therefore that all rice available in Siam in excess of her own needs should be utilised towards relieving this situation until it has been completely redressed, as well as

[23] APW (45) 66, Acquisition of Rice from Siam, 7 May 1945, CAB 87/69, TNA, p.1.
[24] 47, Extracts from Minutes of 12th Meeting of the Armistice and Post-War Committee, 17 May 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.2.
[25] 47, Extracts from Minutes of 12th Meeting of the Armistice and Post-War Committee, 17 May 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.3.

> for the feeding, upon liberation, of neighbouring rice consuming territories such as Malaya, normally dependent on imports from Siam.[26]

The Committee concluded that, based on the information received from Siam of an existing surplus of half a million tons of rice and an anticipated surplus of 800,000 tons from the 1945 rice crop, that Siam should be capable of providing 1.5 million tons of rice to the Allies free of charge. The British proposed that an Allied Rice Unit should be established in Siam and it would be responsible for setting the price at which the Siamese Government paid for the rice crop, which would then be handed over to the Allies free of charge.[27] In the draft settlement agreed by the Committee, the provision of 1.5 million tons of free rice was tied to ending the state of war between Britain and Siam and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two states.[28]

In discussing these proposals, Bevin informed the new Ministerial Committee that since this report had been written, the Siamese Liberation Government had in fact annulled the state of war with Britain. This event, however, had little effect on the objective of British policy towards Siam. Bevin was determined that Britain should maintain the demand for free rice. He told the Committee that Britain's attitude towards the Siamese still depended on their readiness '(a) to make restitution to His Majesty's Government and their Allies and (b) to ensure security and good-neighbourly relations for the future.'[29] A second draft settlement was circulated to the Ministerial Committee for comment. While the bulk of the text remained the same, there was a subtle change in the tone of British policy. Now the provision of free rice would be emphasised as a Siamese contribution to the Allied war effort rather than as a reparation for

[26] FE (M) (45) 2 [Originally circulated as FE (45) 29 (Final), 14 July 1945], Policy Towards Siam, 16 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, pp.4-5.
[27] FE (M) (45) 2 [Originally circulated as FE (45) 29 (Final), 14 July 1945], Policy Towards Siam, 16 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.5.
[28] FE (M) (45) 2 [Originally circulated as FE (45) 29 (Final), 14 July 1945], Policy Towards Siam, 16 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.13.
[29] FE (M) (45) 1st Meeting, 17 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.4.

Siam's role in the war.[30] The new draft was unanimously accepted by the Committee, with the Foreign Office permitted to inform the United States Government of the decided policy.[31]

The State Department's response was received on 1 September 1945 at the British Embassy in Washington. Aware of just how important the export of rice was for Siamese finances, the State Department rejected wholly the demand that Siam provide 1.5 million tons of rice to Britain free of charge.[32] In part, these objections were based on American officials receiving figures from the Siamese Ministry of Commerce that raised doubts as to the Siamese Government's ability to provide such an amount of rice and they estimated Siam's exportable surplus at 780,000 tons.[33] But it was not just the economic implications of the British proposal with which the Americans took issue. They felt it politically unacceptable too. The British proposals restricted both the quantity and destination of Siamese rice exports and the State Department argued that this was 'a definite impairment of Thai sovereignty and independence … contrary to the spirit of the international system envisaged by the United Nations Charter'.[34] As the United States had never recognised the Siamese declaration of war, the State Department rightly held that it could not be party to the negotiated peace between Britain and Siam. Rather, the Americans expressed a willingness to sign a separate tripartite agreement between the three powers, independent of any Anglo-Siamese treaty, which did include establishing a rice unit in Siam. While the State Department stressed that the rice unit in their proposal would work differently from the one envisaged by the British, in reality there was little variation. The Anglo-American Combined Thai Rice Commission (CTRC) would work in partnership with the Siamese Government, advising and assisting them with increasing the production of rice and

[30] FE (M) (45) 1st Meeting, 17 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.5.
[31] FE (M) (45) 1st Meeting, 17 August 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.6
[32] Document 960, Aide-Mémoire by the State Department, 1 September 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter abbreviated as *FRUS*] *1945 Volume VI – British Commonwealth and the Far East*, (https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v06 [date accessed, 13 September 2021]).
[33] 81, John Balfour to Foreign Office, 11 September 1945, CO 852/658/12, TNA, p.1.
[34] Document 960, Aide-Memoire by the State Department, 1 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol. VI*.

its subsequent distribution. While the CTRC's functioned the same as the Allied Rice Unit proposed by the British, the only difference would be the way in which it was presented to the Siamese. The Americans stated that the CTRC would not be imposed through some form of punitive treaty clause, instead relying on 'the cooperation and good faith' of the Siamese Liberation Government to work efficiently.[35]

The American accusation that British policy was undermining Siamese sovereignty and hence the principles of the nascent United Nations (UN) highlighted a contradiction in the foreign policy of the Labour Government. After all, Labour had recognised the important role that an international body could play in alleviating famine, describing the UN as an ally in Britain's 'new war on hunger'.[36] Implicit in the United States' interest in upholding Siam's status as an independent country was an anti-imperialist stance that had been the cause of many wartime debates between the British and the Americans over Far Eastern issues.[37] In January 1945, the State Department had presented President Franklin Roosevelt with an outline of American policy towards Siam:

> We favour a free, independent Thailand, with sovereignty unimpaired, and ruled by a government of its own choosing … The history of European pressure on Thailand and of European acquisition of territory in South-East Asia is vivid in Asiatic memories. This Government cannot afford to share responsibility in any way for a continuance towards Thailand of pre-war imperialism in any guise.[38]

For the Labour Government trying to distance itself from the perception of the exploitative British imperialism practiced by previous governments through its own promotion of a benign and developmental approach to imperial rule, the criticism of British policy emanating from the United States should have been a cause of concern. Indeed, the Foreign Office were of the belief that close post-war co-operation with the Americans in the Far East was 'of great importance

[35] Document 960, Aide-Memoire by the State Department, 1 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol. VI*.
[36] Labour Party, *Let Us Face The Future*, p.11.
[37] See Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*; J. Sbrega, *Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia 1941-1945*, (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1983).
[38] Document 922, Future Status of Thailand, 13 January 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.

for the peace, security and development of the area.'[39] Yet instead of a compromise being found to achieve this co-operation, events led the British to become more determined to acquire rice from Siam free of charge.

Peace treaty negotiations between the British and the Siamese Liberation Government began at the South-East Asia Command (SEAC) Headquarters in Kandy, Ceylon in early September 1945. On his way to these negotiations from his wartime exile in Washington, the newly appointed Siamese Prime Minister, Seni Pramoj, passed through London and met with British officials. John Sterndale Bennett, head of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department, held conversations with Seni in which he pressed the incoming Siamese Prime Minister about the extent of the contribution his government would be prepared to make to the rehabilitation of South-East Asia. Raising the possibility of famine in the region, Sterndale Bennett told Seni that the Siamese 'could contribute very materially to the alleviation of these conditions by a substantial contribution of rice.'[40] During this interrogation, Seni let slip that Siam had, in fact, been able to accumulate an estimated surplus of 1.5 million tons of rice during the war.[41] This was nearly double the previous British and American estimates of c.780,000-800,000 tons.

Seni's lapse inadvertently strengthened Britain's hand. Armed with the information he had provided, a working party of the Far Eastern (Official) Committee met the following day to discuss Siamese rice supplies. Now aware of the true scale of the Siamese rice surplus, the meeting concluded that Britain should seek to receive all 1.5-million-ton surplus of rice free of charge as a straight reparation for Siam's part in the war.[42] In no circumstances, it was agreed, should Siam receive payment for the rice. Given the inflated world price of rice, Siam would be profiting 'in an unreasonable way' from their part in the war, being in a better financial

[39] F 6208/2191/61, British Policy in the Far East, 31 December 1945, FO 371/54052, TNA, p.7.
[40] F 6285/296/40, Memorandum by Sterndale Bennett, 3 September 1945, FO 371/46548, TNA, pp.1-2.
[41] F 6285/296/40, Memorandum by Sterndale Bennett, 3 September 1945, FO 371/46548, TNA, p.2.
[42] 75, Extract from Cabinet Conclusions of Meeting of a Working Party of the Far Eastern (Official) Committee, 4 September 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.1.

position ('possibly twice as well off') than they had been before the war, should they be paid for supplying Britain with rice.[43] Essentially Siam would be profiting from the misfortunes inflicted upon British territories in the Far East by the Japanese occupation, an occupation that the British held Siam, at least in part, to be responsible for facilitating. Describing the free rice demand as 'the most difficult problem in our relations with the United States', the working party produced an ingenious workaround. The rice would not be demanded from Siam. Rather, the Siamese Government would be given the opportunity to offer the rice to the British in return for diplomatic recognition.[44] It was hoped that this would be acceptable to the Americans, especially because, from the outside, the offer of free rice would appear to have emanated from the Siamese themselves rather than having been imposed upon them by the British.

These discussions formed the basis of the British response to the State Department's 1 September rejection of British demands. Issued on 8 September, they informed the Americans of the information they had received from Seni.[45] In British eyes, the demand for free rice would cause no serious financial implications for Siam. A surplus of rice was not the only resource that Siam had been able to accumulate during the war, increasing its wealth of both gold and foreign exchange. As the embassy Aide-Memoire put it, Siam

> alone among the nations involved in the war has been able in war conditions to accumulate a very large surplus of a commodity essential to the life of neighbouring territories, for the lack of which those territories have suffered hardship and even famine. If Siam were to be allowed to unload these involuntarily hoarded stocks at the present scarcity prices, the proceeds would bring Siam's existing holdings of gold and foreign exchange to three times their present level. Even at half that price they would be doubled. In either event Siam would end the war in an incomparably better financial position than any of the other countries which were in a position to offer more serious resistance to the aggressor.[46]

[43] 75, Extract from Cabinet Conclusions of Meeting of a Working Party of the Far Eastern (Official) Committee, 4 September 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.1.
[44] 75, Extract from Cabinet Conclusions of Meeting of a Working Party of the Far Eastern (Official) Committee, 4 September 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, pp.2-3.
[45] Document 968, Aide-Mémoire by the British Embassy to the State Department, 8 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.
[46] Document 968, Aide-Mémoire by the British Embassy to the State Department, 8 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.

The British strongly felt that it would be an injustice to allow the Siamese to sell their accumulated rice stocks at the currently inflated world price 'when so many other nations must continue, for many years, efforts comparable to those which they made during the war in order merely to restore their pre-war standards of living.'[47] They held to their view that Siam had to make restitution to the Allies from the abundance of rice that they had accumulated. The British sought to test the sincerity of America's determination to protect Siam's independence. Should the Siamese Government make freely available their surplus of 1.5 million tons of rice to the Allies, the British enquired whether the Americans would decline to claim their share of it, given their criticism of the British demand.[48] Despite the overall disagreement between the British and American governments over the supply of free rice from Siam, Britain did accept the American proposal to establish the CTRC as part of a tripartite agreement. While this shared intention to set up a combined rice unit in Siam went some way to closing the transatlantic gap, the issue of the British demand for free rice remained problematic. The Americans, although expressing their regret that the British had opted to pursue this course, offered their acceptance on the condition that the rice was not claimed in the name of allies.[49] With regard to procuring and exporting rice from Siam, the Americans declared that their views were 'essentially in harmony' with the British, hoping that the Anglo-American agreement with Siam could be concluded as soon as possible.[50]

Rice Shortages in Malaya

Despite the diplomatic toing and froing between Britain, the United States, and Siam, the simple fact remained that British territories in South-East Asia were desperately short of rice. On 20 October 1945, Admiral Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander, South-East

[47] Document 968, Aide-Mémoire by the British Embassy to the State Department, 8 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.
[48] Document 968, Aide-Mémoire by the British Embassy to the State Department, 8 September 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.
[49] F 7249/296/40, Halifax to Foreign Office, 19 September 1945, FO 371/46550, TNA, p.2.
[50] Document 990, Aide-Mémoire by the State Department to the British Embassy, 9 October 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.

Asia (SACSEA), telegrammed his superiors at the War Office in London with details about the rice situation within his command. Following the Japanese surrender, the British military had assumed immediate responsibility for the distribution of food to all territories within the SEAC, not just British, boundaries until civilian government could be restored.[51] A British Military Administration (BMA) was declared in Malaya and Singapore on 15 August 1945 with Mountbatten receiving full administrative powers for the duration of the period of military rule. Mountbatten's directive tasked him with the 'progressive restoration' of British colonial rule in Malaya.

> The liberation of Malaya necessitates the immediate resumption of His Majesty's Government's responsibility to the peoples of Malaya for their protection and good government … you will during the period of Military Administration be responsible, subject to operational requirements, for the provision of supplies for the needs of the civil population and for local industries and agriculture to a level necessary to prevent disease and unrest ...[52]

Planning 'to prevent disease and unrest' in British territories had been based on the estimated relief requirements first formulated by the YWP in 1943. These had not been revised and as British military officials became aware of the true scale of the food shortages in South-East Asia, Mountbatten declared the YWP plans obsolete.

> It is clear that Malayan stocks are less than YWP estimate … Stocks in Malaya on 1 Oct are estimated at 50,000 tons as opposed to YWP estimate of 129,000 tons. Since the new crop will not be harvested for a further seven months this means a short fall of 10,000 tons a month in local availabilities …[53]

To solve this issue, Mountbatten requested that the British Government seek to change the allocations set by the Combined Food Board (CFB), a joint Anglo-American organisation established in June 1942. One of the many so-called 'Combined Boards' set up during the war

[51] The decision to create an overall Allied command in South-East Asia was made by the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff at the QUADRANT Conference in Quebec in August 1943. Originally consisting of India, Burma, Malaya and Siam, the scope of SEAC was increased at the Potsdam Conference in August 1945. The Netherlands East Indies and French Indo-China (south of the 16th parallel) were transferred to SEAC from the American South-West Pacific Area on 15 August, the day of the Japanese surrender.

[52] 'Appendix I: Directive to SAC on Civil Affairs in Malaya' in Earl Mountbatten, *Post Surrender Tasks: Section E of the Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia 1943-1945*, (London: HMSO, 1969), p.316.

[53] 127, Mountbatten to War Office, 20 October 1945, CO 852/658/12, p.2.

to manage the supply of resource between Britain and the United States, the CFB held the authority to resolve any shared concerns between the two Allies with regard to food supply, such as production, distribution and allocation.[54] Headquartered in Washington, the CFB had expanded in size by the end of the conflict. Canada, France, China, India and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) all had representatives who sat on the CFB's sixteen commodity committees.[55] While in an ideal world, the British would have sought to procure as much rice as possible to alleviate the risk of famine in Malaya, they were, in principle, committed to adhering to the allocations set by the CFB. Up to the end of 1945, the CFB had allocated to Malaya a total of 103,000 tons of rice, of which 45,000 was expected to be received from Siam, 21,500 from Burma and the rest from French Indochina. Because of the aforementioned local shortages of rice stocks in Malaya, Mountbatten requested that the CFB increase Malaya's import allocation by 21,000 tons up to 124,000.[56] The CFB had expected Burma, Siam and French Indochina to export a cumulative total of just over 469,000 tons of rice in the last quarter of 1945.[57] Mountbatten reported back to London that this figure was unrealistic. The real tonnage of rice available for export up to the end of December 1945 was, in fact, only 250,000.[58] To make best available use of what little rice was available, Mountbatten requested that all rice produced by SEAC territories be allocated within the boundaries of his command by the CFB. In theory, this would provide an extra 191,600 tons from stocks that were due to be exported elsewhere. If Mountbatten's suggested remedial actions were followed, there would, nevertheless, still be a deficit of 201,500 tons of rice in

[54] See Text of Joint Declaration issued by Churchill and Roosevelt, 9 June 1942, cited in S. McKee Rosen, *The Combined Boards of the Second World War: An Experiment in International Administration*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp.204-205.
[55] For a full breakdown of the CFB Commodity Committees and their respective memberships see E. Roll, *The Combined Food Board: A Study in Wartime International Planning*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), pp.326-327.
[56] 127, Mountbatten to War Office, 20 October 1945, CO 852/658/12, TNA, p.2.
[57] 125, War Office to Mountbatten, 20 October 1945, CO 852/658/12, pp.1-2.
[58] 127, Mountbatten to War Office, 20 October 1945, CO 852/658/12, p.1.

South-East Asia.[59] If these figures served any purpose, they stressed to the British just how urgent finding a solution to the rice crisis had become.

The situation, however, showed no signs of improving, in fact it was getting worse. One month later, in November, Mountbatten issued an update. The CFB still insisted on basing their allocations on the estimate of 469,000 tons of rice. Now SEAC territories would receive 195,300 tons of this, with a reduced figure of 110,887 to be shipped externally. The total tonnage of rice available in the SEAC area had decreased further to 216,000 tons. To ensure fair distribution, Mountbatten undertook a pro-rata reduction of the CFB plans. This left SEAC territories with a true allocation of only 90,000 tons, leaving Mountbatten short by 63,000 tons of the minimum amount deemed necessary to prevent famine.[60] Again, he requested that he should be allowed to cancel the CFB allocations to be shipped outside of South-East Asia in order to make up the 63,000 tons required. Mountbatten told the Chiefs of Staff that following the CFB allocations would leave him unable to comply with his directive of preventing disease and unrest in SEAC.[61]

The issue of CFB allocations in South-East Asia was then taken up by the Cabinet's Overseas Reconstruction Committee (ORC). In a flurry of bureaucratic activity, the interested departments put together a series of memoranda to make their individual cases. Ben Smith, Minister of Food, took exception to the suggestion of the War Office that the British minimum disease and unrest requirements for South-East Asia should form the basis of allocations of rice in the region instead of those set by the CFB. In the War Office proposal, it was only upon the condition that the British requirements had been met that the CFB should be allowed to allocate SEAC rice to territories outside of the command. As the CFB viewed the needs of all recipient territories as equal, Smith wrote that it would be 'be next to impossible to persuade the

[59] 127, Mountbatten to War Office, 20 October 1945, CO 852/658/12, pp.2-3.
[60] 174, Mountbatten to the Chiefs of Staff, 15 November 1945, CO 852/658/12, p.1.
[61] 174, Mountbatten to the Chiefs of Staff, 15 November 1945, CO 852/658/12, p.1.

Combined Food Board that the claims of SEAC must take precedence over those of other areas.'[62] According to Smith, challenging the CFB allocations was not a risk worth taking. Such a course 'would have most gravely prejudicial effects on Combined Food Board procedure' and might undermine the authority of an international body that Labour had declared its intention to support.[63] Jack Lawson, Secretary of State for War, issued a defence of his department's proposals. He informed the ORC of the information received from Mountbatten about the true scale of the rice shortage in South-East Asia. Lawson added that if the CFB allocations were to be followed, Malaya would be at the point of starvation as early as 15 December 1945.[64] Lawson placed the rice crisis in the wider context of Britain's regional duties. If the necessary rice was not provided, the Government would be accepting 'the grave dangers of famine and disorder' in the SEAC area.[65] With British military resources already stretched because of demobilisation and occupation duties in the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina, they could not afford further political unrest in the region. Lawson implied that if food riots occurred within the territories for which the British were responsible, it might require a slowing down of the demobilisation process to ensure that the military had the necessary manpower to effectively police the situation. For these reasons, therefore, the War Office advocated rejecting the current CFB allocations.

The Colonial Office also supported rejecting the existing CFB allocations because if famine were to occur in South-East Asia it would be perceived as an early failure of the benevolent imperial rule that Labour was keen to project. Hall, now Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs, invoked the ideal of a benevolent British empire when he reminded his fellow

[62] ORC (45) 45, Allocation of Rice in the Far East, 21 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.
[63] ORC (45) 45, Allocation of Rice in the Far East, 21 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.
[64] ORC (45) 46, Rice Allocations for Far Eastern Liberated Territories, 22 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.
[65] ORC (45) 46, Rice Allocations for Far Eastern Liberated Territories, 22 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.

members of the ORC that Britain held a 'special obligation' to its colonial populations in Asia. Now was an opportunity to make good on their promises of aid and assistance to the colonies, he said. After all, it had been the Japanese conquest of South-East Asia which had laid bare the failures of British imperial administration for all to see.

> Although we had the responsibility for the defence of these territories, we were unable to prevent them from being over-run by the Japanese, and remaining under enemy oppression for over three years. Apart from this special obligation, failure to provide rice, which is the staple food, on a standard sufficient to prevent famine will clearly undermine all our efforts to rehabilitate these territories, and will weaken our position not only in the territories themselves, but in the whole of the Far East.[66]

Not only would famine damage British prestige in the region but it would also harm the productivity of rubber and tin industries, a vital component of Labour's plans for Britain's post-war economic recovery. The rehabilitation of these industries was 'of urgent importance as a matter of Imperial and international policy, not merely of local interest; and that rehabilitation is intimately dependent on an adequate labour supply and therefore on food.'[67] Hall hoped that the threat of reduced rubber and tin production posed by famine would be enough to persuade the CFB to improve the rice allocation to British territories. The Americans, after all, were the other great voice on the CFB, and dangling the possibility of reduced access to Malayan tin and rubber could be enough to persuade the Americans to agree to the revisions recommended by Mountbatten.[68]

When the ORC met to discuss the issue of rice supply in South-East Asia, the priority in solving the food crisis was still focused on obtaining rice from Siam. The Committee suggested that more could be done to speed up the rate of export from Siam. The slow rate of export was not the result of a shortage of rice in that country, after all the Prime Minister had admitted to the existence of a surplus of 1.5 million tons, but rather that the Siamese did not possess the

[66] ORC (45) 48, Rice Allocations for Far Eastern Liberated Territories, 27 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.1
[67] ORC (45) 48, Rice Allocations for Far Eastern Liberated Territories, 27 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.1
[68] ORC (45) 48, Rice Allocations for Far Eastern Liberated Territories, 27 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.

transport capacity of trucks, trains and rivercraft, to move the rice from mills in the interior to the ports for export. Ben Smith still held that requesting a change to CFB allocations was a futile action, reasserting that it could cause long-term damage to the status of the Board.[69] It would also not get to the root cause of the issue because Britain would still be struggling to get the required rice out of Siam. Bevin agreed that more should be done to stress the serious nature of the situation to the CFB and the Americans, telling his fellow committee members that it required 'an immediate solution' lest they be faced with starvation conditions which would result in 'very considerable financial and military commitments' in South-East Asia, commitments which the British could not afford.[70] Bevin instead suggested that Britain make a direct approach to the United States Government, requesting that they make reductions to their own programme of importing South-East Asian rice for the American domestic market. Bevin also suggested that Mountbatten be allowed to provide support to Siam to help export more rice. He suggested that military resources, especially British Army vehicles and Royal Navy vessels, be placed at the disposal of the Siamese Government to help move the much-needed rice out of the country. The military, Bevin said, 'must treat the speed-up of export of rice from Siam as an operation of war.'[71] It was this three-pronged approach – military support of Siamese rice exports, a direct approach to the American Government, and seeking a longer-term adjustment of the CFB allocations – that offered the most likely chance of relieving the risk of famine. At the end of discussions, the ORC approved Bevin's plan, and the relevant ministers were instructed to carry out their duties accordingly.

Following the ORC conclusions, the matter of Siamese rice supply was passed back to the Far Eastern (Ministerial) Committee. Now, it was the scale of Britain's demands for free rice from Siam that was at the heart of the issue. British officials in South-East Asia were under

[69] ORC (45) 10th Meeting, 28 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA p.1.
[70] ORC (45) 10th Meeting, 28 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA p.1.
[71] ORC (45) 10th Meeting, 28 November 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.

the impression that the policy agreed by the ORC would not work unless the demand for free rice underwent modification. The Siamese Government were having issues acquiring rice from farmers to meet the obligation to provide 1.5 million tons free of charge. Confidence in the local currency was low, with rice 'the only thing representing real value' in Siam.[72] While this was said to be a factor in causing a slowing down of the export rate, Ben Smith told the Ministerial Committee that Britain still did not have the full co-operation of the Siamese Government.[73] Negotiations over the Anglo-Siamese treaty were still ongoing. Until the treaty was officially signed, the Siamese Government had no enforceable obligation to provide the British with free rice. This delay, Smith said, allowed for rumours to circulate within Siam about the extent of Britain's demands, based on the idea that the free rice clause was an 'intolerable extraction.' These rumours had given a cause for opposition to the Siamese Liberation Government to rally around. With their position under threat, it was suggested that the government were now unable to sign the treaty for fear of popular rebellion. This was a particular problem for London because British officials held the government to be 'the most friendly that we are likely to see in power in Siam for some time' and Britain stood to lose any progress in the procurement of rice should it collapse and be replaced by one less sympathetic to British demands.[74]

With this in mind, Smith suggested that the British were now faced with four possible policy choices to procure the Siamese rice needed to avert famine in its colonial territories in South-East Asia. The first, and arguably the most drastic, was to commandeer Siam's existing rice stocks through military force. Smith warned his Cabinet committee colleagues against this action. It was not 'military or physically practical' but also 'politically undesirable and economically disastrous', for it would eliminate any chance of obtaining surplus Siamese crops in the future.[75] The second choice was to maintain the current demand for the free provision of

[72] FE (M) (45) 16, Siamese Rice, 8 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.1.
[73] FE (M) (45) 16, Siamese Rice, 8 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.3.
[74] FE (M) (45) 16, Siamese Rice, 8 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.4.
[75] FE (M) (45) 16, Siamese Rice, 8 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.4.

1.5 million tons of rice. Yet this, as previously stated, ran the risk of the incumbent Siamese Government collapsing in the face of popular opposition. The third choice was to modify the demand, either reducing the quantity of rice to be provided for free or extending the period in which the Siamese were expected to deliver it. This course appeared the more likely. Both the Americans and the Siamese were in favour of lowering the quantity requested while British advisors in Siam supported an extension of the delivery period. The fourth and final option was to withdraw the demand for free rice altogether, instead purchasing from Siamese stocks through the usual commercial markets.[76]

When the Ministerial Committee met to discuss these proposals, it argued that the free rice demand should not be modified. Rather, the Treasury suggested that there was a fifth option that Britain could follow: to offer financial aid to Siam to stimulate agricultural production there. This aid would take the shape of a delivery of between 100,000 to 200,000 ounces of gold (which would eventually be paid for by the Siamese) and was intended to help restore faith in the Siamese currency. In taking this measure, the Treasury hoped that rice farmers would be more prepared to part with their produce and sell it to the Siamese Government, which in turn would go some way to enabling them to contribute towards the free rice demand. The Treasury plan was supported by Bevin, who declared himself attracted to any proposal 'which might restore the confidence of the hoarder and thus make him part with his rice.' [77] Smith did not agree. He felt that the option most likely to produce rice exports from Siam was to abandon the free rice clause altogether. Bevin was reluctant to give way, informing the committee that, in his opinion, forfeiting the free rice clause may encourage the Siamese to press for more concessions in the yet-to-be-signed peace treaty.[78] For him, this was a matter of British prestige as Bevin and the Foreign Office were both convinced that Britain was still a great power on the

[76] FE (M) (45) 16, Siamese Rice, 8 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.5.
[77] FE (M) (45) 4th Meeting, 11 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.1.
[78] FE (M) (45) 4th Meeting, 11 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.2.

world stage and should continue to be one.[79] Abandoning the free rice clause may have been interpreted as an early sign of weakness. If a small (and technically still hostile) state was seen to be capable of forcing the British to modify their policies, it may have had grave effects on the standing of the new Labour Government in both domestic and international opinion. Rice was, however, needed immediately. Malaya was only four days away from the War Office's 15 December estimate of starvation conditions. Therefore, the Committee reached a compromise. Whilst the free rice clause would not be abandoned, immediate requirements would be paid for, in sterling, direct to the Siamese. In the meantime, the Treasury's proposal to deliver a shipment of gold would also be communicated to the Siamese.[80]

The rice situation in Malaya was also on the Committee's agenda that day. Once again, the War Office sought permission for Mountbatten to suspend the CFB rice export programme to recipients outside of SEAC. So critical was the current food situation in Malaya that the rice ration was about to be slashed to the minimum threshold for prevention of disease and unrest: 12 ounces per day for men; 4.5 ounces for women. Lord Nathan, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for War, warned that these reductions risked political disturbances in Malaya, compromising Mountbatten's capacity to fulfil his directive. Smith reasserted his previous argument that Britain could not detract from CFB allocations without causing 'a serious blow' to the Board's authority.[81] This time Bevin played the mediator. He suggested that the CFB seemed to be unaware of the humanitarian emergency that was unfolding in South-East Asia and enquired whether Britain could request a suspension of the CFB export programme for a short period of time while they worked on a means to resolve the impending crisis. Smith agreed that this was a possibility, although they would have to wait until the end of the month for

[79] A. Adamthwaite, 'Britain and the World, 1945-9: The View from the Foreign Office', *International Affairs*, 61:2, 1985, p.225.
[80] FE (M) (45) 4th Meeting, 11 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, pp.2-3.
[81] FE (M) (45) 4th Meeting, 11 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.3.

confirmation. Smith was due to visit the CFB in Washington on 29 December and he would ask for a suspension of all exports from the SEAC area up until 31 January 1946.[82]

The Signing of the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty

A breakthrough in the rice supply issue did emerge from Washington in December 1945. It was not from British talks with the CFB, but rather an eventual compromise with the US Government over the free rice demand. With Anglo-Siamese treaty negotiations reaching their conclusion, the State Department recommended to the Siamese Government that they hold off signing the peace treaty until all the details of the separate Tripartite Agreement had been confirmed between Britain and the United States. Having spent the previous three months exchanging memoranda, on 13 December the State Department authorised the United States Ambassador to London, John Winant, to hold face-to-face talks with the Foreign Office to inject some urgency into these discussions. Winant was instructed to inform the British that it was now the conclusive opinion of the State Department that Britain should drop the demand for obtaining 1,500,000 tons of rice free of charge from Siam. The Americans believed that it would not produce the desired results of providing the necessary supplies to avert famine in Malaya.

> The immediate rice shortage in Southeast Asia is acute and will probably remain severe for a long period, probably two or three years … It is of utmost importance to increase the immediate availability and production of rice in Southeast Asia. The proposed rice levy and other inflationary factors and the uncertainty attendant upon the effect of the British demands on Siam are definitely detrimental to this basic objective not only directly, but also indirectly by weakening the Siamese Government and by destroying Siamese willingness to cooperate.[83]

The State Department agreed with the British that food shortages in South-East Asia risked jeopardising the ability of Mountbatten to fulfil his directive, assumed on behalf of the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff, of preventing disease and unrest in the SEAC area. As the British were also beginning to appreciate, the Americans also felt that the free rice demand was

[82] FE (M) (45) 4th Meeting, 11 December 1945, CAB 96/9, TNA, p.3.
[83] Document 1018, Acheson to Winant, 13 December 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*. – Dean Acheson was Acting Secretary of State while James F. Byrnes attended the Moscow Foreign Minister Conference between 16-26 December 1945.

counter-productive to improving the amount of rice that Siam was able to supply for South-East Asia. With this in mind, they urged the British to drop the free rice clause and instead accept the Siamese offer to supply 20,000 tons per month over the next 12 months. Not only would British acceptance of this offer increase the likelihood of more rice coming out of Siam, but it would also be a 'valuable step' in strengthening post-war Anglo-American relations, as the Foreign Office saw it.[84] Before these discussions could be held, the Americans received notification that the Siamese Government were prepared to sign the Anglo-Siamese peace treaty in its current form, without modification to the demand for 1,500,000 tons of rice free of charge. Again, the Americans pressed the Siamese to delay signature of the treaty, with the Siamese Government having agreed to sign out of fear that a further hold-up would lead to harsher terms being imposed by the British. When Winant was able to meet with the Foreign Office on 17 December, the British informed him that there was no prospect of an immediate Siamese signature to the treaty and assured the Americans that it would not be concluded within the next few days at the very least.[85] The extra time allowed for the British to communicate the conclusions made by the Far Eastern (Ministerial) Committee on 11 December. Both the Treasury offer to provide gold to help reduce inflation and the decision that Britain would temporarily suspend its demand of for free rice and pay for its immediate requirements in full were passed on to the Siamese and American governments on 18 December. Both Winant and Charles Yost, the State Department's political representative in Siam, reported to Washington that the British, in modifying their claims from Siam, had done enough to appease American criticism.[86]

Not all were impressed with the solution that had emerged. Back in Whitehall, the Colonial Office expressed its dissatisfaction with the final decision because it was not only gold

[84] F 11774/296/40, Foreign Office to Halifax, 18 December 1945, FO 371/46555, p.2.
[85] Document 1022, Winant to Acheson, 17 December 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol. VI*.
[86] Document 1024, Yost to Acheson, 18 December 1945; Document 1027, Winant to Acheson, 18 December 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol. VI*.

that the British had decided to offer the Siamese. On 30 November, at a meeting organised by the War Office, it was suggested that Siam be provided with consumer goods, such as agricultural tools and textiles, to help stimulate its economy. The British assumed that rice growers in Siam would be more likely to part with their produce in order to be able to purchase these goods. At the Ministry of Food's insistence, it was suggested the Board of Trade find a way of providing consumer goods for Siam. The Board informed the meeting that this would be 'extremely difficult.' As officials from the Colonial Office pointed out, British territories in South-East Asia were also short of consumer goods.[87] To supply Siam with consumer goods ahead of British colonies would not have been an easy policy to defend, they said, especially when these territories were facing the possibility of food shortages too. The Ministry of Food told the Colonial Office that there was a stark choice to be made in Malaya. They had to decide between supply of food or supply of consumer goods.[88] Despite the Board of Trade and Colonial Office protests, the War Office meeting settled on providing consumer goods as a necessary inducement to Siam to part with its accumulated rice stocks. The goods would be provided from shipments within the SEAC area, in other words those destined for British territories, on the promise that the War Office would replace them.[89]

Under pressure from the Ministry of Food, Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, made a direct approach to the Colonial Secretary. Cripps asked Hall if the Colonial Office would be prepared to divert some the consumer goods destined for Malaya to Siam in light of the colony's 'vital interest' in acquiring rice.[90] Both the War Office conclusion and Cripps' enquiry resulted in much discussion within the Colonial Office. Edward Gent, the

[87] 198, Minutes of Meeting Called to Consider the Question of Rice Exports from Siam, 30 November 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.2.
[88] 198, Minutes of Meeting Called to Consider the Question of Rice Exports from Siam, 30 November 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.2.
[89] 198, Minutes of Meeting Called to Consider the Question of Rice Exports from Siam, 30 November 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.3.
[90] 201, Cripps to Hall, 4 December 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.1.

Assistant Under-Secretary, laid out the situation facing Malaya in clear terms. The choice presented by the Ministry of Food between rice or consumer goods for Malaya was an 'unfortunate' one, but an ample supply of rice was 'of course more essential to Malaya than consumer goods.' Gent recognised that Siam was the only source of rice capable of quickly meeting Malaya's needs, but stated that Siam, as a defeated enemy state, should 'not be in a position to offer us this choice.'[91] T.W. Davies, head of the Colonial Office Commercial Relations and Supplies Department, cast doubt on the logic of shipping consumer goods to Siam when there was no guarantee of a definite improvement in the rice situation. The diversion of consumer goods shipments from Malaya, Davies argued, could undermine the civil administration once restored. While the War Office was presently responsible for governing Malaya, authority would eventually be handed back to the Colonial Office, leaving them to face the political consequences of the denial of consumer goods.[92] The Colonial Office blamed their dilemma on the Treasury's reluctance to pay for Siamese rice supplies. In their view, the desperate situation in Malaya, that of impending famine, should take precedence over the Treasury's desire to reduce overseas expenditure.

With these factors in mind, the Colonial Office rejected Cripps' suggestion to transfer consumer goods bound for Malaya to Siam. In a letter to Cripps, Hall made clear that the best way of drawing the required rice out of Siam was to pay for it. Both Hall and his Office

> must oppose the diversion to Siam of goods destined for Malaya … an early and liberal supply of consumer goods is of vital importance … Both rice and consumer goods are essential for Malaya. If by giving up consumer goods I could see a direct return in the way of rice, my attitude might be modified. But there can be no direct *quid pro quo* … [93]

Despite the Colonial Office's irritation, the final decision on consumer goods was made on 21 December as the ORC met once again to discuss the rice situation in South-East Asia. Cripps informed the committee that the Board of Trade, acting under the instruction of the Ministry of

[91] Minute by GEJ Gent, 5 December 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA.
[92] Minute by TW Davies, 6 December 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA.
[93] 206, Hall to Cripps, 13 December 1945, CO 852/568/12, TNA, p.1.

Food and Foreign Office, had been seeking to provide consumer goods for Siam. He had concluded that there was no possibility of providing these goods from new production from British sources so they would have to come from surplus stocks that had been allocated to British territories.[94] The ORC approved Cripps' plan to afford Siam equal priority with the liberated British territories in the Far East on making claims to the British surplus of consumer goods.[95] Notable in the minutes of this ORC meeting was the absence of any Colonial Office input. For all their talk of protecting Malaya's interests, the decision to allow Siam equal access to consumer goods passed without their protest. Perhaps even more remarkable was that the Colonial Office representative at this ORC meeting was Arthur Creech Jones, arguably Labour's most vocal proponent of the colonial development ideology.

Ultimately, rice still remained the most important provision for the British to supply Malaya. In early December 1945, a wave of political unrest rippled through the country as the food shortages showed no sign of improving. For instance, strikes began as 200 members of Singapore's fire brigade went on strike followed a few days later by some 1,000 staff from four Singapore hospitals. In both cases, the striking workers demanded extra rice rations.[96] Despite these protests, the BMA was left with no choice but to go through with reducing the daily rice ration for Malaya's urban population to the minimum disease and unrest benchmark of 12 ounces for men and 4.5 ounces for women and children, first set by the YWP in 1944. In rural areas, the situation was even worse, with no rice ration to be issued at all.[97] Again strikes ensued with 6,000 workers under the employment of the BMA refusing to work and protesting the ration cut with banners emblazoned with slogans such as 'we want rice' and 'we don't want to die of starvation.'[98]

[94] ORC (45) 53, Consumer Goods for Siam, 19 December 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.2.
[95] ORC (45) 12th Meeting, 21 December 1945, CAB 134/594, TNA, p.5.
[96] *The Straits Times*, 8 December 1945, p.3; *Malaya Tribune*, 10 December 1945, p.4.
[97] 208, General Denning to General Anderson, 8 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[98] *The Straits Times*, 21 December 1945, p.3.

Faced with the possibility of increasing civil unrest in Malaya, which was threatening the ability of the BMA to oversee the colony, British officials resumed negotiations with Siam by offering a significantly modified rice proposal. Aware that the demand for 1,500,000 tons of rice free of charge risked destabilising the country, the British now suggested that the CTRC should make an independent assessment of the available rice surplus there. Alongside this proposal, the British decision to offer consumer goods, gold, and payment for immediate rice supplies (until the gold shipment arrived in Bangkok) were communicated to the Siamese representatives. In the draft treaty, which was presented at these meetings, the British no longer specified an exact amount to be delivered from the Siamese rice surplus, stating that the 1.5-million-ton figure would now be the limit of their demands. The Siamese were also given an increased window of time for them to provide Britain with rice, up to 1 September 1947.[99] This softening of the British position satisfied both the Americans and the Siamese Government. In late December 1945, the State Department informed the British Embassy that they no longer objected to the signing of the peace treaty, stating that the eventual compromise reached over rice was 'the best obtainable' considering the differing Anglo-American views.[100] The Siamese delegation swiftly followed suit and the terms of the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty were finally agreed on 26 December 1945. The treaty was signed shortly after, on 1 January 1946, officially ending the state of war between Britain and Siam. Both the British and American governments released statements to the press declaring their satisfaction that the treaty was now finally concluded. Speaking from the newly relocated SEAC headquarters in Singapore, Dening said that 'It is a very pleasant thought … that Siam will once again be treading the same path with us in the direction of liberty, of peace, and of prosperity.'[101] The American statement followed much the same tone, expressing the belief that friendly co-operation between Britain and Siam

[99] *UN Treaty Series*, Vol. 99, p.140. (https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2099/v99.pdf [date accessed, 15 October 2021]).
[100] F 12168/296/40, Halifax to Foreign Office, 22 December 1945, FO 371/46557, p.1.
[101] *Manchester Guardian*, 2 January 1946, p.5

would make 'the greatest possible contribution to the security, stability and economic welfare of South-East Asia.'[102] The signing of the Treaty was also celebrated in Malaya, with the local press reporting on how the rice obtained under the treaty terms would be used by the British to relieve Malaya's food shortages and avert the possibility of famine.[103]

Conclusion

What emerges in the early months of British famine relief policy in Malaya is a sense of the balancing act that the Labour Government were forced to undertake throughout the immediate post-war period. In their search for the cheapest and (hopefully) quickest method of providing the necessary rice to avert famine in Malaya, the British arrived at an initial policy which was both ineffective in ensuring the security and economic development of South-East Asia and damaging to their own regional interests. The free rice clause was intended to provide Malaya with the foodstuffs deemed necessary to keep the population (and workforce) fit, healthy and free of disease, and therefore less likely to cause unrest. In theory, the provision of rice for Malaya offered the Labour Government an opportunity to practice the developmental, paternalistic approach to colonial governance that the Party had been formulating throughout the war years. By attempting to achieve this with free rice from Siam, it created a paradoxical situation in which the Labour Government found themselves accused by the United States of the very thing they were hoping to avoid: the imperialist exploitation of South-East Asia.

The demand that Siam would provide Britain with 1,500,000 tons of free rice was slowly diluted, in part as a response to American criticism but also from a realisation that it risked political instability in Siam. It was an undertaking that the Siamese could not financially afford, threatening to undermine the post-war government which had made clear its desire to restore friendly relations with Britain. Therefore, ironically, in attempting to fulfil their 'special obligation' to the people of Malaya, the British were forced to extend a programme of aid and

[102] Document 1042, Yost to Byrnes, 31 December 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI*.
[103] *The Straits Times*, 3 January 1946, p.1.

assistance beyond the boundaries of the British Empire to an enemy state which had been in part responsible for the difficulties now being faced in that very colony. This was not wholly determined by a desire to project Labour's Britain as an altruistic actor in international affairs. Indeed, British famine relief policy did conceal an ulterior motive, namely that successfully alleviating famine in Malaya was key to restoring British rule in the colony. Famine relief was thus also connected to London's desire to restore some of the prestige lost in the wake of the Japanese invasion, rebuilding the faith of the Malayan people that the British Government were working in their interests, and with the economic benefits of renewed access to Malaya's profitable natural resources of rubber and tin, which the Labour government deemed vital to the recovery of Britain.

Indeed, for the Labour Government, the final agreement over rice reached with the Siamese was an attempt to simultaneously secure access to Malayan natural resources whilst projecting Britain as a benevolent imperial power. It offered, however, only a temporary respite. When the true extent of the food crisis facing South-East Asia became evident in the early months of 1946, the British would find themselves reassessing, yet again, their role in the region, seeking new and increasingly more complex ways of upholding their rule.

2: Allocating and Distributing Rice in South-East Asia

As part of Mountbatten's post-war occupation duties, the British had assumed responsibility for the distribution and allocation of rice for territories within the South-East Asia Command (SEAC) area on behalf of the Combined Food Board (CFB). They continued this practice after the period of military occupation ended, first through their own regional organisation of the Office of the Special Commissioner (Commissioner-General from 1948) for South-East Asia, and then subsequently through co-operation with the United Nations (UN) and its subsidiary bodies, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) whilst seeing Britain's own role gradually marginalised by the UN agencies. This chapter explores how Britain tried to assert control over the management of rice supplies in South-East Asia to favour its own colonial territories and ultimately failed in this objective and conceded authority on the matter to international intergovernmental organisation.

Initially seeking to manage the situation for themselves, Peter Lowe has argued that the British willingly 'bore the brunt of coping with the restoration of order' in South-East Asia in the immediate aftermath of the war.[1] With the attention of the United States government elsewhere in Asia, notably on Philippine independence and occupation duties in Japan and Korea, the British were able to take advantage of this and insist to American policy-makers that they would look after South-East Asia on behalf of their wartime ally and the wider international community in the shape of the UN. In theory, this should not have been totally unacceptable to a Labour government. The Party had traditionally held an internationalist position on foreign policy which has been defined by its efforts 'to transcend national boundaries in order to find solutions to international issues.'[2] The extreme circumstances which

[1] P. Lowe, *Contending with Nationalism and Communism: British Policy Towards South-East Asia 1945-1965*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.251.
[2] R. Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World: Volume 1 – The Evolution of Labour's Foreign Policy 1900-51*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.6.

Attlee and his government inherited in the summer of 1945 made the continuance of Britain's imperial presence in South-East Asia even more necessary. Both Attlee and Bevin had served in the wartime coalition ministry and had been left with the unshakeable impression that Britain's status as world power was closely interlinked with its possession of a global empire. This, coupled with Britain's desperate need for dollars, meant that Labour could not simply end the British Empire even if they so wished. Indeed, as D.K. Fieldhouse has stated, Attlee and his ministers were 'not a coven of philosopher kings insulated from the exigencies of the real world.'[3] Their recasting of imperial rule in terms of humanitarian development was an attempt to maintain Britain's position as a world power after the Second World War.

Despite Labour's supposed internationalist foreign policy, Britain's relationship with the nascent UN organisation was not without tension. The imperial powers found themselves increasingly under attack in New York. The British, in an attempt to defend their colonial record during UN meetings, projected the benefits of their continued colonialism in developmental and humanitarian language.[4] Whilst stating that it was doing so on behalf of the international community, Britain's attempt to manage the South-East Asia food crisis was very much undertaken in their own national interest. Indeed, it suited the British agenda to assume a leading role in South-East Asia for it allowed them to reassert their colonial authority under the cover of internationalism. In their attempt to take charge of resolving the rice shortage, and hence managing regional food supplies in their own interests, the British established new bureaucratic structures in Whitehall and Singapore, starting with the Cabinet Committee for South-East Asia Food Supplies and the Office of the Special Commissioner for South-East Asia.

[3] D.K. Fieldhouse, 'The Labour Government and the Empire-Commonwealth, 1945-1951' in R. Ovendale (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments 1945-1951*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), p.83.
[4] See J.L. Pearson, 'Defending Empire at the United Nations: The Politics of International Colonial Oversight in the Era of Decolonisation', *JICH*, 45:3, 2017, pp.525-549.

Setting Up the Special Commission

With the period of military occupation scheduled to end in March 1946, the British began to finalise their preparations for the transfer to civilian government in Malaya and Singapore. Since the end of the war, Whitehall had been reliant on Mountbatten and the War Office to keep them informed of the food situation in South-East Asia. Following a direct order from Clement Attlee, a new Cabinet committee for South-East Asia Food Supplies (SEAF) was established in February 1946. Attlee was particularly fond of the Cabinet Committee structure. By the end of his second administration in 1951, his governments had included 466 committees.[5] Chaired by Lord Nathan, a junior minister, the SEAF Committee was formed with the specific intention to 'concert action by United Kingdom Departments with a view to increasing supplies of rice and other food-stuffs' in South-East Asia.[6] The SEAF Committee consisted of a core membership of representatives from the departments most involved in relieving famine so far: the Ministry of Food, Foreign Office, Colonial Office, War Office, and the Board of Trade, with input from the Treasury and others when required. The restoration of colonial rule in Malaya, however, also provided the British with a moment in which to reshape their regional authority. Alongside the Colonial Office scheme to create a Malayan Union, Whitehall was drawing up plans for a new post to co-ordinate British foreign and colonial policy throughout the whole of South-East Asia. This new office would work in conjunction with the SEAF Committee to keep London abreast of the food situation in the region.

An overarching body to co-ordinate British policy in South-East Asia was not a novel idea. In October 1941, the War Cabinet agreed to the creation of a post entitled 'Commissioner-General for the Far East' to operate out of Singapore.[7] Various other plans arose throughout the

[5] P. Hennessey and A. Arends, 'Mr. Attlee's Engine Room: Cabinet Committee Structure and the Labour Government 1945-1951', *Strathclyde Papers on Government and Politics*, 26, 1983, p.9.
[6] CP (46) 52, 19 February 1946, CAB 129/7/2, TNA, p.1.
[7] WP (41) 286, 29 October 1941, CAB 66/20/9, TNA – Alfred Duff Cooper, a Conservative MP and War Cabinet minister, took up the position in December 1941. His time in Singapore was short-lived, being recalled to London in late January 1942 before the Japanese invasion.

course of the war, including reconstituting Dening's role as Chief Political Adviser to Mountbatten outside of the military command with its own staff and it was even suggested that a new Minister of State for South-East Asia be created within the Foreign Office.[8] This new ministerial position was favoured by the Foreign Office for it held certain political advantages. Dening believed that Britain had an opportunity to make a positive intervention in a region that they had hitherto neglected.[9] Just a few weeks prior to the Japanese surrender, he presented the case to his superiors back in London. By virtue of SEAC being primarily a British-led command, they had

> assumed responsibility for the areas contained within its boundaries. That is all to the good provided we discharge that responsibility. If we do, then we stand a fair chance of restoring British prestige in part of the world where it had sunk to a very low ebb. If we don't, then I should expect that, as the years roll on, the peoples of the Far East will look less and less to Britain and more and more to any Power which is the position to afford them strategic, political and economic security.[10]

Dening's above interpretation implies that Britain had a moral duty to the region, having failed to defend its colonial territories and this could be used to justify a continued period of British rule, upholding British colonial power and maintaining an imperial connection to the region.

Added to this moral argument, staff in the Foreign Office appeared to have been captivated by the suggestion that the food crisis had presented an opportunity for Britain to extend its regional influence beyond Burma and Malaya, into French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies, and Siam. In an internal memorandum, Sterndale Bennett, head of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department, argued that 'unless some action is taken soon the tendency will be for the various territories to drop back into working in more or less water-tight compartments.'[11] Sargent felt that, despite all the wartime planning, the course of events in Asia – the sudden surrender of Japan and the power vacuum left behind – had caught the British off-

[8] A.J. Stockwell, *Malaya Vol. 1*, pp.104-105.
[9] F 5022/47/23, Dening to Sterndale Bennett, 2 August 1945, FO 371/46434, TNA, p.2.
[10] F 5022/47/23, Dening to Sterndale Bennett, 2 August 1945, FO 371/46434, TNA, p.2.
[11] F 8195/47/23, Memorandum by Sterndale Bennett, 9 October 1945, FO 371/46434, TNA, p.2.

guard and that the proposed regional organisation was 'now definitely overdue.'[12] Bevin stated how he was 'strongly in favour of quick action' and elevated the issue to ministerial level.[13] On 18 October 1945, a meeting was chaired by Attlee and attended by officials from the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office, including Sterndale Bennett and Sargent. At this meeting it was agreed that a new 'high-powered civilian' post should be created and 'held not by a Minister of State or Resident Minister but by an official of Ambassadorial rank' reporting directly to the Foreign Office.[14] Now that the shape of the regional body had finally been decided, all that was left was finding a suitable candidate to lead it.

The pressing nature of the rice shortages facing South-East Asia accelerated the search for this official. When the Cabinet met on 31 January 1946 to hear Smith's dire appraisal of the impending rice shortage, it concluded that local authorities would be better suited to managing the crisis and responsibility for organising famine relief was passed on to the still vacant post of the head of this planned organisation, now entitled the Special Commissioner for South-East Asia.[15] Despite his desire to appoint someone outside of the Foreign Office, Bevin turned to the incumbent British Ambassador to Egypt and Sudan, Lord Killearn (Sir Miles Lampson), to fulfil the new role. Killearn was a career diplomat who had spent most of his pre-war service in Asia, working in both Japan and China. He was also a master in crisis management. As Minister to China, Killearn had overseen the British response to the crises in Manchuria and Shanghai in the early 1930s. As High Commissioner to Egypt and Sudan, he had then been influential in the signing of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and managing of Anglo-Egyptian relations throughout the Second World War. It was because of this experience that Bevin found Killearn to be the 'right person' for the position of Special Commissioner.[16] Killearn accepted

[12] F 8195/47/23, Minute by Sargent, 12 October 1945, FO 371/46434, TNA.
[13] F 8195/47/23, Minute by Bevin, n.d., FO 371/46434, TNA.
[14] F 8195/47/23, Minute by Sargent, 20 October 1945, FO 371/46434, TNA.
[15] CM (46) 10, 31 January 1946, CAB 128/5/10, TNA, p.75.
[16] FE 46/15, Bevin to Lord Killearn, 3 February 1946, FO 800/461, TNA, p.1, 2.

the offer a few days later as Bevin stressed to him the importance of alleviating the impending food shortage. It was his most 'immediate and desperately urgent' task and would be far more difficult than the problems Killearn encountered in wartime Egypt.[17] Still Killearn was not deterred, describing the administrative work he would have to undertake as 'just the type of job I really like.'[18]

Such was the urgency of getting on top of the rice shortage that the Foreign Office were prepared to send Killearn out to Singapore without any real definition of what his role entailed. Killearn himself told Mountbatten how he was being 'dumped … in some rather nebulous capacity' into South-East Asia.[19] Indeed, the ill-defined nature of the Special Commission suggest that the British just wanted to be seen to be taking proactive steps to deal with the South-East Asian rice shortage. The finer points could be worked out later, once Killearn had arrived in Singapore. To bring Killearn up-to-speed with the food situation he would be facing when he arrived, the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department compiled a memorandum detailing all that had occurred thus far with the Anglo-Siamese treaty and its subsequent revisions. The Foreign Office warned Killearn that failure to avert famine could have disastrous consequences for Britain. Officials in London believed that the United States government were likely to blame the British should famine occur in South-East Asia.[20] Dodging this accusation was of paramount importance. Britain was still struggling with the financial implications of fighting the Second World War and the sudden withdrawal of American economic support at the end of the conflict. In order to overcome these difficulties, British officials in Washington had successfully negotiated a loan of a further $3.75 billion from the United States in December 1945. This loan deal had yet to be ratified by Congress and American political opinion was still suspicious of Britain's post-war imperial intentions, suspicions which had been heightened by

[17] FE 46/28, Bevin to Killearn, 12 February 1946, FO 800/461, TNA, p.2
[18] FE 46/33, Killearn to Bevin, 13 February 1946, FO 800/461, TNA, p.1.
[19] F 2477/333/61, Killearn to Mountbatten, 14 February 1946, FO 371/54017, TNA, p.1.
[20] F 2936/3/61, Siamese Rice Situation, 14 February 1946, FO 371/53841, TNA, p.5.

Britain's military operations in French Indochina and Netherlands East Indies.[21] Any action which could prejudice congressional approval of this vital loan had to be avoided.

The Foreign Office produced two draft directives for Killearn. The first set down his general responsibilities as Special Commissioner, the co-ordination of foreign and defence policy between British officials in South-East Asia on behalf of the Foreign Office.[22] His second directive specifically outlined his role in resolving the food crisis.

> The problem is to make certain that all possible steps are taken to alleviate the food crisis in those areas of South-East Asia where shortages exist or are likely to arise; and that maximum supplies of rice or other appropriate foodstuffs are produced and made available from the producing areas in South-East Asia with the maximum efficiency and speed for use both in South-East Asia and elsewhere.[23]

Killearn was to liaise with the various British officials in South-East Asia (the colonial governors of Burma, Malaya, and Singapore as well as diplomatic staff in French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies, and Siam) to co-ordinate measures to increase the supply of rice throughout the region. It was his 'constant endeavour to secure agreement between all the authorities concerned, both British and foreign, on the adoption of measures designed to alleviate the food crisis.'[24] He was instructed to keep the British government informed of any further aid requirements for the various territories that they could fulfil, and also to offer advice and make recommendations to both London and the British colonial governments regarding the food situation.[25] The Foreign Office drafts were approved by Attlee on 26 February and submitted to the SEAF Committee for confirmation in early March, eventually being signed off by Bevin and dispatched to Singapore to coincide with Killearn's anticipated arrival date.

[21] R.B. Woods, *A Changing of the Guard: Anglo-American Relations 1941-1946*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p.374.
[22] F 3117/333/61, Draft Directive to the Special Commissioner responsible to the Foreign Secretary in South-East Asia, FO 371/54018, TNA, pp.1-2.
[23] F 3117/333/61, Draft Directive on Food for the Special Commissioner in South-East Asia, 26 February 1946, FO 371/54018, TNA, p.1.
[24] F 3117/333/61, Draft Directive on Food, 26 February 1946, FO 371/54018, TNA, p.3.
[25] F 3117/333/61, Draft Directive on Food, 23 February 1946, FO 371/54018, TNA, p.4.

Alongside the political officers on Killearn's staff, however, were attached other experts. Sir Charles Empson, the Commercial Counsellor to the British Embassy in Cairo, re-joined Killearn at the Special Commissioner's request in Singapore to serve as his economic adviser. Dr William Clyde was appointed food adviser. Clyde had worked for both the Ministry of Food and Colonial Office during the war, reporting on food supply issues in various British colonies such as Palestine and Ceylon. Dr Lucius Nicholls was also appointed to work alongside Clyde as a nutritional expert. Nicholls had spent the majority of his professional medical career in Asia, arriving in Ceylon in 1915. He served in that colony for thirty years before taking up the position on the Special Commission. Despite Killearn's uncertainty, the fact that the Foreign Office were deploying such expertise to the Special Commission enabled Britain to show it was taking the food crisis seriously. This was, however, as much a propaganda exercise as it was a genuine attempt to resolve the rice shortage. The presence of a high-ranking British official, with a team of supporting experts, on the ground in South-East Asia was used to demonstrate to the Americans that Britain was taking an active role in relieving the rice shortage and hence could serve to improve relations between the two. With the two new corresponding bureaucracies established in Whitehall and Singapore, the British could start to get to grips with the scale of the rice shortage facing South-East Asia.

Resisting International Control

Killearn finally arrived in Singapore on 16 March 1946. Having taken over Mountbatten's duties for food supply, Killearn and his staff also moved into the former offices of the military administration in the Cathay Building in downtown Singapore. For his official residence, Killearn requisitioned the sultanate palace of Bukit Serene, located outside of the city on the southern-most tip of the Malay peninsula, across the Strait of Johor with views overlooking Singapore Island. Killearn quickly got to work in organising a preliminary regional conference on food to be held at Government House, the residence of the Governor of Singapore, in late March. This initial meeting was attended solely by British representatives from the region,

including the military administrations in Malaya, Borneo, and Hong Kong; occupation forces in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies; the colonial governments of India, Ceylon, and Burma as well as diplomatic staff from Siam. There was no local representation at this first meeting. The assembled British delegates discussed available rice supplies in their respective territories before resolving to keep Lord Killearn informed of any developments in this matter.[26] Killearn reported these results back to the Foreign Office the following day.

> My opinion is that the conference was definitely a success … marked by most co-operative spirit of representatives of all participating territories. There was a general feeling that good direct personal contact had been of high value to all.[27]

London was equally pleased with the early progress Killearn had made. Bevin congratulated the Special Commissioner for 'an admirable start grappling with your formidable task.'[28] A second meeting swiftly followed in mid-April at which it was agreed to formalise this structure by holding monthly Liaison Officers' Meetings (LOMs) under the supervision of the Special Commission at Killearn's headquarters in Singapore. Again, Killearn appeared pleased with the proceedings of the April conference, telling London that he had found it 'eminently successful'.[29]

Despite the collaborative nature of these early meetings, Killearn faced criticism that the agreed distribution of rice unfairly favoured British colonial territories. The delegations at both the March and April meetings, after all, consisted only of British officials. The Americans sought a more democratic method for allocating and distributing rice in South-East Asia, looking to increase the influence of other regional actors in the process. When the British had first taken on responsibility for carrying out Combined Food Board (CFB) allocations at the end of the war, they had never intended it to be a permanent arrangement. In October 1945, British representatives on the CFB in Washington proposed that a sub-committee of the CFB

[26] F 5606/3/61, Minutes of Final Day of March Conference, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.2.
[27] F 4853/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 29 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.
[28] F 5025/3/61, Bevin to Killearn, 5 April 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.
[29] F 5967/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 18 April 1946, FO 371/53861, TNA, p.1.

Rice Committee be established in London to control the allocation and distribution of rice in South-East Asia. The British proposal was accepted by the CFB with the caveat, put forward by the Americans that the sub-committee would then relocate from London to Singapore as soon as possible. This plan never came to fruition. No sub-committee was formed in London and Killearn's office had assumed most of the functions that the sub-committee was originally intended to perform.

In June 1946, the United States and British Governments agreed to extend the operations of the CFB until the end of the calendar year, in the process rebranding the organisation as the International Emergency Food Council (IEFC). Later that month, the State Department invited British diplomatic staff in Washington to discuss the rice situation in South-East Asia. At this meeting, the Americans presented an Aide-Memoire to Lord Inverchapel, the British Ambassador to the United States. While praising the 'sensible and practical' action that Killearn had undertaken in response to the food crisis, in American eyes, it was 'not desirable for one country only to undertake control of all rice exports' in South-East Asia. Furthermore, the absence of the CFB Sub-Committee meant that Britain and the United States had inadvertently breached diplomatic agreements with Siam. Under the terms of the Tripartite Agreement, the Combined Thai Rice Commission (CTRC), the joint Anglo-American agency responsible for rice procurement, was supposed to report directly to the sub-committee. To get around this apparent oversight, the State Department urged the prompt establishment of the Sub-Committee in Singapore, chaired by the British and with wider membership of American, Indian, Chinese, Siamese, Dutch and French representatives. The State Department hoped that Killearn would work in close conjunction with the sub-committee and that the sub-committee itself would use the work of the Special Commission as a basis for its own operation.[30]

[30] F 9536/3/61, Inverchapel to Foreign Office, 26 June 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, p.1.

While Inverchapel was convinced that the American pursuit of a sub-committee in Singapore was evidence of their desire for more influence in South-East Asia, officials in London could see the benefits of this arrangement.[31] Although Killearn had taken up tackling the food crisis as a matter of immediate importance, it was not his primary political objective. Foreign Office staff back in London felt that food supply issues were taking up too much of Killearn's time and hence supported the establishment of the sub-committee as it would assume the allocative and distributive functions for rice which Killearn was currently performing. The State Department's endorsement of British chairmanship of the new sub-committee was also music to Foreign Office ears, relieving Britain of 'much onerous work' and sole responsibility for dealing with food problems in South-East Asia.[32] Greater international involvement would not be detrimental to British famine relief policy, potentially increasing the willingness of both the French and Dutch governments to co-operate and perhaps even agree to give up rice from their allocations for British deficit territories.

The American proposal was the subject of interdepartmental discussions in Whitehall. The Ministry of Food returned to the original British proposal made to the then-CFB in October 1945, circulating the following terms of reference for the sub-committee as it was first intended to operate.

1) To make surveys for report to the CFB of the available surpluses of rice.
2) To assess the quantities of ancillary materials required to ensure that the existing surpluses can readily be made available and to recommend to the appropriate authorities steps to obtain the necessary materials.
3) To make recommendations with respect to marketing and the stimulation of production of new crop price.
4) To recommend price policies designed to maximise supplies and to facilitate distribution.
5) To co-ordinate action whereby rice from each exporting area can be made available in accordance with allocations recommended by the CFB.[33]

[31] F 9545/3/61, Inverchapel to Foreign Office, 26 June 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, pp.1-2 - Following his meeting with State Department officials, Inverchapel commented that 'it was obvious [the Americans] wanted a much bigger finger in the pie.'
[32] F 9545/3/61, Minute by MW Errock, 1 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA.
[33] F 9545/3/61, Ministry of Food Memorandum, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, p.1.

E L. Ridley, Deputy Director of Rice at the Ministry of Food, informed Allen, that, in his opinion, while points 1-4 were 'virtually redundant', having largely been integrated into the duties of Killearn's organisation, it was the fifth point which was the cause of this renewed American interest.[34] Sir Harold Sanderson, Director of Rice at the Ministry, suggested that Britain should agree to the formation of the sub-committee. It should, however, remain in London and only perform functions unfilled by Killearn. In doing so, the now-IEFC would still be kept up to date with developments in South-East Asia without having to involve itself in the day-to-day administration of food distribution.[35]

That same morning, Lord Nathan convened an ad-hoc meeting of members from his SEAF committee to discuss the sub-committee proposals. Here, the practical aspects of establishing an IEFC Sub-Committee in Singapore were called into question. Killearn had found it difficult enough to organise his monthly meetings of British officials in South-East Asia. Co-ordinating regular meetings of an international body would be 'infinitely more difficult.' Indeed, the meeting concluded that Killearn's organisation was working well, cultivating a spirit of regional co-operation between South-East Asian territories to relieve the food crisis and the American intervention was therefore unnecessary.

> If all recipients of rice from South-East Asia pool agreed to the distribution that was made under existing arrangements then it was hard to see how anyone else was concerned. It was not a case of dictatorial decisions by any one country. It was a case of decisions reached by all concerned by agreement amongst themselves.[36]

Nathan's meeting left it to the Foreign Office and Ministry of Food to draft a reply to the State Department, stating Britain's willingness to establish the IEFC Sub-Committee in London which would work in co-operation with Killearn and the CTRC but would have no executive functions of its own over the management of food supplies in South-East Asia. Despite the fact it would have no practical functions, the Foreign Office argued that it would serve a political

[34] F 9545/3/61, Ridley to Allen, 4 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, p.1.
[35] F 9545/3/61, Ridley to Allen, 4 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, p.1.
[36] SEAF (46) 84, Minutes of Meeting held at the War Office, 4 July 1946, CAB 134/678, TNA, p.2

purpose, satisfying the United States Government that the British were not seeking a monopoly over the greater part of the world's rice supplies for the benefit of their own colonial territories.[37]

During the drafting process, the Foreign Office received a telegram from Killearn which outlined his support for the American proposal. Recognising that his organisation had enabled Britain to immediately respond to on-the-spot problems as and when they arose, Killearn felt that establishing the sub-committee in Singapore would help resolve a number of international issues that he was facing, including the existing discrepancy between the declared functions of the CTRC and how it had operated in practice, the French refusal to include French Indochinese rice in the South-East Asia pool, and the difference in the price of rice between exporting territories of Burma and Siam among others.[38] Despite Killearn's support, opinion in Whitehall remained unchanged and the British preference for a sub-committee located in London was communicated to the Americans. Allen suggested allowing an American representative to take part in Killearn's liaison meetings might be an agreeable compromise. In this way, the Americans would have more direct influence over the South-East Asian food situation as Killearn's organisation possessed executive powers rather than serving solely an advisory role as would the IEFC Sub-Committee.[39]

London's planned response to the Americans was telegrammed to Killearn for comment the following day. Expressing their desire that the Special Commission be left undisturbed in its work, the Foreign Office informed Killearn that London planned to suggest to Washington that Walter Kahn, one of the American representatives on the CTRC and therefore someone who British diplomats in the region had much recent experience in dealing with, would be a suitable candidate to join Killearn's liaison meetings. They also told Killearn how they planned to explain to the State Department that it was his intention to open these meetings to

[37] F 9545/3/61, Minute by Errock, 6 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA.
[38] F 10139/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 10 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.1.
[39] F 9536/3/61, Minute by Allen, 12 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA.

representatives of other foreign governments with interests in the area, namely the French, the Dutch, and the Siamese.[40] This approach appeared to satisfy all of Britain's objectives. Killearn would remain in charge of co-ordinating a regional famine relief effort which, with greater international co-operation, would now hold more chance of succeeding. Criticisms that Killearn's organisation favoured British territories would be diluted, as other nations would be presented with the opportunity to have more influence over the allocation and distribution of rice throughout South-East Asia.

Receipt of this telegram appears to have caused a complete *volte-face* in Killearn's opinion. Having previously supported the establishment of the IEFC Sub-Committee in Singapore, he now agreed with London's conclusion that it would be an unnecessary burden to have to create two organisations which were essentially performing the same task. Faced with the choice between his own monthly meetings or adding further administrative work to his remit, Killearn told London that he now preferred to develop his organisation into a more internationally representative body which would act as 'a clearing house for dealing with all relative problems on the basis of mutual agreement' as the Foreign Office had first intended to communicate to the Americans. Having only held three liaison meetings by then, Killearn argued that he had been endeavouring to achieve this objective by gradually demonstrating the convenience and efficiency of his organisation to the other nations with an interest in the South-East Asian rice crisis. Although the American proposal demonstrated that they were yet to be convinced, persuading them to accept the monthly Liaison Officers' Meetings as the official body tasked with dealing with the regional rice shortage was 'the best solution.'[41]

Persuading the United States Government was easier said than done. Despite Killearn's approval of London's counterproposal, Inverchapel sought further clarification from the Foreign Office about future representation at Killearn's liaison meetings. Staff on the British

[40] F 9536/3/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 13 July 1946, FO 371/53885, TNA, pp.2-3.
[41] F 10584/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 20 July 1946, FO 371/53894, TNA, pp.1-2.

Food Mission (BFM) in Washington had highlighted to the ambassador possible causes of tension with the United States government. Killearn did not want to include China and the Philippines in his talks on the grounds that they were not 'part of the South-East Asia family.'[42] After all, neither country appeared within the scope of Killearn's original area of responsibility as specified by his terms of reference. Keeping representation at Killearn's meetings confined to what was an incredibly prescriptive definition of South-East Asia allowed for Britain to justify its efforts to maintain regional authority. The Americans, however, wanted both nations to be represented. The BFM agreed with this and Inverchapel informed London that Killearn's meetings ought to include representation from all major claimants on South-East Asian rice whether they were fell within the geographical scope of Killearn's mission or not. More specifically, the BFM stressed the benefits that a closer association with China would have on regional rice supplies.[43] As has been previously stated, Chinese merchants dominated the South-East Asian rice trade, especially in Siam. Including the Chinese government in discussion about food distribution might encourage the merchants to release more of their stocks, thus increasing the availability of rice throughout the region and therefore the allocation made to Malaya and Singapore.

Given the BFM's opinion and the likelihood of the State Department arguing that China should be included, Inverchapel suggested that he should tell the Americans that, while the British were prepared to extend membership of the liaison meetings to the French, the Dutch and the Siamese, this was only because they were rice producing nations. They did not 'wish to add claimants to what is in effect a producers liaison body' at this critical stage in the food crisis.[44] Killearn was asked by London for his comments on Inverchapel's suggested line of defence and voiced his disapproval at some of the ambassador's wording.

[42] F 10584/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 20 July 1946, FO 371/53894, TNA, p.2.
[43] F 10762/3/61, Inverchapel to Foreign Office, 24 July 1946, FO 371/53895, TNA, p.1.
[44] F 10762/3/61, Inverchapel to Foreign Office, 24 July 1946, FO 371/53895, TNA, p.1.

> My liaison officers meetings are not a 'producers liaison body' but meetings of representatives from all territories in South-East Asia covered by Special Commissioner's directives. The membership thus includes rice deficit territories as well as rice producing territories in the area.[45]

Killearn believed that membership of the meetings should remain confined to countries within his declared sphere of influence. Both the French and the Dutch had been asked to send officials from Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies to represent their colonies at future meetings. Siamese representation had been provided by the CTRC with Kahn, the American member of the combined commission, attending the May and June meetings. Killearn saw no issues should the Siamese and United States governments wish to have their own representation separate to the CTRC. If London did consider it essential to gain American support to maintain the work of the Special Commission as an alternative to the IEFC Sub-Committee, Killearn stated that he would not object to Philippine or Chinese membership. He suggested, however, that to prevent the liaison officers' meetings becoming 'too large and contentious', American and UNRRA representatives could cover the Philippines and China as part of their respective remits. Indeed, Killearn made it quite clear that, unlike the BFM, he did not want the Chinese government being given a voice in the distribution of South-East Asian rice, fearing that direct Chinese representation might lead 'to constant troubles and delay in our day-to-day operations.'[46]

Despite the back-and-forth between London, Singapore, and Washington, Inverchapel handed the original British counterproposal to maintain Killearn's organisation in place of establishing the IEFC Sub-Committee to the State Department at the end of July. Whilst acknowledging the American opinion about the undesirability of one country controlling the movement of rice in South-East Asia, Britain justified maintaining Killearn's operation by saying he was merely 'acting as the channel for giving practical effect to the recommendations

[45] F 10936/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 27 July 1946, FO 371/53895, TNA, p.1
[46] F 10936/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 27 July 1946, FO 371/53895, TNA, pp.1-2.

of the IEFC' regarding rice, 'fully conscious of the international responsibilities this implies and he has been constantly in touch with the authorities in the foreign territories in his area.'[47] State Department concerns were therefore misplaced, they argued. Killearn's monthly meetings had acted as a suitable substitute in the absence of a direct IEFC presence in South-East Asia, providing a forum to deal with regional issues of food supply and overcome the Anglo-American failure to fulfil their obligations to Siam under the Tripartite Agreement.[48] Although initial American reaction was that the British policy was an outright rejection of their proposal, they moderated their attitude following discussions. It emerged from these meetings that the Americans supposedly wanted an organisation with distinct authority to manage rice allocations in South-East Asia. Inverchapel was told it had never been the United States intention to imply that the IEFC Sub-Committee would interfere with or even replace the work of Killearn and the Special Commission. While the Americans had reiterated that they would like to see China involved in this international body, Inverchapel told the Foreign Office that American pressure over this was not so great that he felt it required an immediate decision.[49]

And seemingly no immediate decision was forthcoming. There was little progress throughout the rest of August in the Anglo-American discussions about the future of Killearn's organisation and the proposed establishment of an IEFC Sub-Committee in Singapore. With the September liaison meeting looming, Killearn telegrammed London enquiring about the status of the Special Commission.[50] Prompted by this, Inverchapel approached the State Department to obtain a definitive statement about their position. While expressing their support for the 'excellent work' of the Special Commission on food supplies, the State Department replied that they still did not believe that the international responsibility of rice distribution could be satisfactorily carried out by a representative of a single nation. They suggested a

[47] F 11681/3/61, Aide-Memoire for the State Department, 30 July 1946, FO 371/53900, TNA, p.2.
[48] F 11681/3/61, Aide-Memoire for the State Department, 30 July 1946, FO 371/53900, TNA, p.2.
[49] F 11265/3/61, Inverchapel to Foreign Office, 2 August 1946, FO 371/53898, TNA, p.1.
[50] F 12412/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 26 August 1946, FO 371/53905, TNA, p.1.

compromise with the British. Rather than replace Killearn's liaison meetings, the IEFC sub-committee should work in co-operation with the Special Commission. It should consist of a core membership of countries with an interest in the South-East Asian rice crisis, including Britain and the United States, and the appointed representatives should hold the authority 'not only to keep their respective Governments fully informed but also to speak for their Governments on all matters relating to the implementing of IEFC recommended allocations.' They suggested that the IEFC recognise the two co-operating organisations as the overarching official body for allocation and distributing rice in South-East Asia.[51] This was accepted by the British as being 'much more practical' than the first American suggestion to dispose of Killearn's organisation altogether. It allowed for Killearn, and hence Britain, to maintain a degree of executive power over food supply in South-East Asia whilst also appeasing the American desire to see some of Britain's authority devolved to other nations. Given the persistence of the American argument, and Killearn's previously stated acceptance of this outcome as a possibility, British officials in London gave way to the Americans proposal, approaching Killearn for final approval in early September to accept the establishment of an IEFC Sub-Committee in Singapore. Upon its creation, Killearn suggested that his LOMs should combine with the meetings of the sub-committee. This would be advantageous to British territories that would be able to make their case for greater allocation direct to the IEFC themselves, rather than through Killearn's organisation.[52]

On 27 September, the IEFC approved the founding of a Sub-Committee on Rice for South-East Asia in Singapore to operate along the lines the British and Americans had agreed. With functions mirroring Killearn's liaison meetings, the sub-committee were to meet once a month to formulate monthly shipping programmes for the quarterly rice allocations for South-East Asian territories (set by the main IEFC Rice Committee in Washington) and could

[51] F 12601/3/61, Inverchapel to Killearn, 29 August 1946, FO 371/53906/3/61, TNA, p.1.
[52] F 12916/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 4 September 1946, FO 371/53911, TNA, p.1.

recommend the specific quantity, source and destination of rice supplies throughout the region to ensure these allocations were met. Its membership was to consist of countries with allocations from South-East Asian sources and the exporting countries themselves and would operate on a majority vote system to pass any recommendations. China, France, India, the Netherlands, Britain, the Philippines, and the United States were all invited to appoint representatives to attend the first meeting, scheduled for late October.[53]

Despite agreeing to it, the official founding of this new organisation created a series of issues for Britain regarding Killearn's current system. With Killearn in Batavia mediating negotiations between the Dutch and the Republic of Indonesia, responsibility for how the Special Commission would work with the IEFC Sub-Committee fell on Killearn's economic adviser and acting Special Commissioner, Charles Empson. Empson asked London whether the Sub-Committee would be employing its own international staff or making use of the Special Commission for its work. If it were the latter, Empson told London that they would need to take on additional staff.[54] The size of Killearn's mission had been a point of contention in Britain and numerous questions had been raised about it in Parliament. Numbers had risen from around 200 employees in late July to 582 in October and the organisation's predicted annual running cost had more than doubled, up from £150,000 to approximately £325,000 in the same period, all of which was borne by the British government.[55] When Conservative MPs questioned why the rising costs should come at the expense of British taxpayers, it was defended by the Labour Government as being 'fully justified' to prevent famine in British territories in South-East Asia. Philip Noel-Baker, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, told the House of Commons that the staffing costs of Killearn's organisation were a vital economic contribution that London 'was

[53] F 14179/3/61, British Food Mission, Washington to Ministry of Food, 9 October 1946, TNA, pp.1-2.
[54] F 15070/3/61, Empson to Foreign Office, 16 October 1946, FO 371/53926, TNA, p.1.
[55] House of Commons Debate, 29 July 1946, vol. 426, cc503-4; House of Commons Debate, 9 October 1946, vol 427, c51.

able to make, and glad to make, towards the solution of an extremely difficult problem.'[56] With cost seemingly no object, the Foreign Office told Empson that the British did not believe that it would be necessary for the IEFC Sub-Committee to have its own staff. Their belief was confirmed by the BFM which informed London that it was IEFC policy to utilise the structure of Killearn's organisation as far as possible. Any extra work necessary was to be shared with American consular staff in Singapore.[57]

Despite a hope that the Sub-Committee being based in Singapore would make it easier for British colonial territories to make direct representation to the IEFC, they still did not have their own individual membership. The concerns of Malaya, Singapore and Burma would need to be transmitted to the main IEFC Committee in Washington through the British representative. Ultimate influence over food supply therefore remained in the hands of the imperial powers. At the October Liaison Officers' meeting chaired by Empson, the Burmese delegation highlighted the 'strange' absence of representation for their country, the largest producer of rice in South-East Asia, from the new sub-committee.[58] The representative of the Netherlands East Indies remarked that he presumed membership of the sub-committee was based on membership of the main IEFC Rice Committee in Washington. Colonies such as Burma and the Netherlands East Indies, were therefore dependent on their respective metropolitan governments to make their case. Empson again raised this with London and the BFM who agreed that Burma was eligible for independent membership of the sub-committee and would be making recommendations to the IEFC to invite the colony.[59]

Empson, however, recognised that this might set a dangerous precedent. He asked the Foreign Office if it was London's intention to see that all British territories in South-East Asia

[56] House of Commons Debate, 29 July 1946, vol. 426, c504.
[57] F 15070/3/61, British Food Mission, Washington to Ministry of Food, 24 October 1946, FO 371/53926, TNA, p.1.
[58] F 15892/3/61, Minutes of the Sixth Liaison Officers' Meeting, 13-14 October 1946, FO 371/53930, TNA, p.28.
[59] F 15070/3/61, British Food Mission, Washington to Ministry of Food, 24 October 1946, FO 371/53926, TNA, p.1.

be granted membership and their own vote in finalising IEFC rice allocations and distribution in the region.[60] Both the Governors of Malaya and Singapore demanded membership of the sub-committee, arguing that it would be disadvantageous for their colonies to be excluded given that the majority of their IEFC rice allocations came from South-East Asian sources.[61] The Foreign Office responded that Burma was only being considered because of its 'unique position' among British colonies as a major producer of rice. They would not therefore be supporting Malaya and Singapore in their case for representation.

> We do not consider it politic to advance claims to membership on behalf of other British territories in South-East Asia. In our opinion we should be over playing our hand and generate suspicions that sub-committee is being used as an instrument of British policy.[62]

Having agreed to the establishment of the sub-committee as a partial response to American criticism about their perceived domination over South-East Asian rice supplies, the British were determined to not see the IEFC Sub-Committee head the same way. It was to be a truly international organisation with each territory possessing an equal say over food supply issues. While Burma's membership was agreed, to allow Malaya and Singapore the same privilege might lead to other European imperial powers demanding the same right be granted to their colonies. This could have led to the formation of rival voting blocs on the sub-committee, increasing competition over an increasingly scarce supply of rice. Since the inception of Lord Killearn's organisation, the British had always been keen to stress the importance of co-operation in overcoming the regional rice shortage, especially considering the interconnectedness and interdependence of South-East Asian rice supply networks.

The formation of the IEFC Sub-Committee threw up one final hurdle for British diplomats. Decisions regarding the actual operation of the committee had to be made at the first meeting, including chairmanship and how it would communicate with the main IEFC

[60] F 15907/3/61, Empson to Foreign Office, 30 October 1946, FO 371/53930, TNA, p.1.
[61] F 16398/3/61, Edward Gent to Arthur Creech Jones, 8 November 1946, FO 371/53932, TNA, p.1.
[62] F 15907/3/61, Foreign Office to Empson, 9 November 1946, FO 371/53930, TNA, p.1.

Committee in Washington. With Empson opening proceedings, as Britain had been trusted with organising the first meeting, the sub-committee set about voting on its chairmanship. Empson was nominated by the Dutch and Indian representatives and received unanimous support from the other delegations, being elected as chairman for a term of one year. With chairmanship in British hands, discussion moved onto to clarifying the nature of the work that the sub-committee would be undertaking, including the estimates of future allocations and available supplies. This aspect raised concern in London. Staff at the Ministry of Food expressed their alarm that, in their understanding, these discussions were going far beyond the original terms of reference set out by the IEFC. Ridley wrote to Allen that he believed that it was never intended for the sub-committee to discuss future allocations or recommend availabilities to the IEFC.

> The Sub-Committee of the IEFC in Singapore should only deal with the month-to-month availabilities and distribution thereof, and make ad-hoc decisions if emergencies arise in the month. The object of this was to assist the IEFC in Washington who could not possibly take decisions which required accurate knowledge of the shipping position and the general food position of each claimant country, especially when the time factor was generally of the greatest importance.[63]

Staff at the Foreign Office, however, disagreed with Ridley's interpretation. While agreeing that the actions of the sub-committee were perhaps a generous reading of its terms of reference, they saw no issue providing that all decisions were referred to the parent IEFC Rice Committee in Washington. They urged the Special Commission to proceed with caution. While there was nothing technically incorrect about the sub-committee discussing future rice allocations in South-East Asia, if they were instigated by British representatives then it might give cause for American criticism. London feared that United States could allege that Britain was aiming to lead it 'by the nose.' The Foreign Office admitted that while British leadership of the IEFC Sub-Committee was their long-term objective, this was best achieved gradually.[64] For all their insistence on international accountability and a more collaborative and democratic approach to

[63] F 16193/3/61, Ridley to Allen, 11 November 1946, FO 371/53930, TNA, pp.1-2.
[64] F 16193/3/61, Foreign Office to Empson, 12 November 1946, FO 371/53930, TNA, p.1.

food control in South-East Asia, British policy regarding international administration concealed an ulterior motive: the maintenance of British colonial authority in that region. Through the work of Killearn's organisation and the subsequent approval of the IEFC Sub-Committee, each was a calculated attempt to ensure that Britain's voice remained loudest, even if it meant making short-term concessions in the hope that these could eventually be clawed back.

Maintaining British Authority

By the end of 1946, with the worst of the rice crisis having apparently passed, British officials began to discuss the future of Killearn and his Special Commission. Michael Wright, Killearn's deputy, wrote to Dening in January 1947 arguing in favour of continuing the functions of the commission. There remained much 'long-term work' to be done in the fields of nutrition and health and spreading scientific knowledge throughout the region, he said.[65] In line with the humanitarian and developmental approach to empire with which Britain was justifying the recolonisation of Malaya and Singapore, Wright commented that the people of South-East Asia were yet to be convinced and more needed to be done to assure them that a British presence in the region was in their interest.

> If, as I believe, we can offer them a more attractive way of life, if we can help them in their future development more sympathetically and more effectively than Communism, there is a good chance that they will work with us and turn to us more and more … To abolish the Office would leave a vacuum, and to return to the system of penny packets and water-tight compartments which proved disastrous before the war.[66]

Foreign Office staff in London also agreed with Wright's conclusions. Christofas, believing that food shortages were likely to remain an issue until the end of 1948 at the earliest, said that it would be 'a pity' if the Special Commission was wound down.[67] Food control was key to regional stability and Killearn had put the British in prime position to manage the situation through the monthly liaison officer meetings he was chairing in Singapore.

[65] F 1147/1147/61, Wright to Dening, 15 January 1947, FO 371/63543, TNA, p.1.
[66] F 1147/1147/61, Wright to Dening, 15 January 1947, FO 371/63543, TNA, pp.3-4.
[67] F 1147/1147/61, Minute by Christofas, 3 February 1947, FO 371/63543, TNA.

But Britain's ability to influence the situation was under threat. Increasing United Nations (UN) interest in Asian affairs, through both the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the later founding of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), risked the erosion of regional authority that Britain had worked to establish. John Boyd Orr, Director-General of the FAO, had written to Killearn in January 1947. He commented that the work undertaken by the Special Commission was 'closely in line with the ideas and objectives' of the FAO. Boyd-Orr suggested that the two could co-operate. The Special Commission could provide the FAO with statistical information about regional rice supplies collected at the monthly liaison officer meetings. In return, the FAO would help in 'furthering the work' of Killearn, beyond his remit throughout the rest of Asia through a second conference on nutrition to be held within the next eighteen months.[68] Killearn forwarded Boyd-Orr's letter to London for further advice, informing Dening that 'there was a rather suspicious smell' about the FAO's 'incursion'.[69] Foreign Office Far Eastern Department staff in London appeared equally cautious regarding Boyd-Orr's proposals. While acknowledging that collaboration was 'highly desirable', Christofas argued that achieving it under the auspices of the UN might lessen Britain's ability to manage the food crisis towards its own ends. For example, the British suspected that a soon-to-be independent India was attempting to use the FAO's Rice Study Group as 'a means of forming an Anti-Western bloc of oriental countries.'[70] Colin Crowe, also of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department, expressed a reservation that while he felt that the FAO would not be in a position to hold up its end of the proposed deal given the sheer volume of work it was currently undertaking, Britain would be powerless to stop them from on organising a conference should they so wish. [71] Some officials argued, however, that the Special Commission could be used as the basis for FAO operations in South-East Asia. While the FAO

[68] F 2256/2/61, Boyd-Orr to Killearn, 20 January 1947, FO 371/63469, TNA, p.1.
[69] F 2256/2/61, Killearn to Dening, 8 February 1947, FO 371/63469, TNA, p.1.
[70] F 2256/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 27 February 1947, FO 371/63469, TNA.
[71] F 2256/2/61, Minutes by Crowe, 1 and 18 March 1947, FO 371/63469, TNA.

was headquartered in Washington DC, it had recently set up a regional office in Rome to cover its activities in Europe. Should the time come when the FAO decided that it required a similar office in Asia, Singapore was the 'obvious choice' for its location with Killearn's organisation 'acting as a nucleus' for the office.[72]

Despite the pretence of regional collaboration over food supplies in their policy, British officials in Washington and London were cautious of growing international involvement in the South-East Asian rice crisis. The present system of Killearn's monthly liaison officer meetings being used to advise the IEFC about regional rice availabilities had been built up with British authority at its centre, a symbol of Britain's renewed commitment to assist the region after the Second World War and restore lost prestige. The IEFC, however, would not last forever. The FAO were taking an increased interest in its operation. The United States were keen to see the abolishment of international controls and return to free trade of food produce and the Foreign Office were fearful of this outcome. In a telegram to Eric Roll, Assistant Secretary at the MoF, Dening suggested that Britain would have to defend its desire for continued control 'on political grounds rather than on the basis of administrative convenience.'[73] Indeed, the moment seemed opportune to make such a defence. On 12 March 1947, US President Harry S. Truman approached Congress for $400 million worth of aid for Greece and Turkey. The Greeks were embroiled in a civil war between the monarchist government and communist rebels and the Soviet Union was making increasingly aggressive demands upon the Turks regarding access to the Black Sea. Known as the 'Truman Doctrine', this aid was intended to support Greece and Turkey to resist communist influence. American policy-makers feared that communism might spread to the rest of Europe and the Middle East should these two nations fall. Dening argued that British food policy was helping to resist communism in South-East Asia, restoring the faith

[72] F 1147/1147/61, Minute [signature indecipherable], 17 February 1947, FO 371/63543, TNA.
[73] F 4455/2/61, Dening to Eric Roll, 21 March 1947, FO 371/63474, TNA, p.1.

of South-East Asian colonies in the ability of Western Europe to look after them and reduce the chance of rebellion.

> in the light of President Truman's speech and the realisation by America of increased responsibility for stability throughout the world, we should argue that a continuance of controls of rice is essential for political stability of South-East Asia. In the present mood of the Administration we might find a sympathetic response to such a statement of case.[74]

In linking Britain's regional famine relief policy with the United States' global attempt to contain the spread of communism, Dening was seeking to preserve British authority in post-war South-East Asia. The British could insist to the Americans that their objectives were aligned and that the best way to stop communist influence growing in the region was a continued British presence. There was, however, an irony in this situation. After all, it was the sudden announcement of Britain's withdrawal of financial support for the Greek government and their subsequent request to the State Department urging them to take on this burden which instigated American aid to Greece and Turkey. Indeed, the early period of 1947 was marked by a recalibration of Britain's overseas commitments. Their intention to eventually withdraw from India, Burma, and Palestine had already been made public. Having successfully persuaded the United States to take on the responsibility for containing communism in eastern Europe, Britain could focus its own efforts elsewhere, especially in its attempts to maintain control over the parts of empire it felt worth clinging on to, such as Malaya and Singapore.

Killearn had to also contend with the emergence of ECAFE. In December 1946, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution which recommended setting up two commissions, one in Europe and the second in Asia, in order 'to give effective aid to the countries devastated by war'. ECAFE was established in March 1947 to

> initiate and participate in measures facilitating concerted action for the economic reconstruction and development of Asia and the Far East, for raising the level of economic

[74] F 4455/2/61, Dening to Roll, 21 March 1947, FO 371/63474, TNA, p.1.

> activity in Asia and the Far East and for maintaining and strengthening the economic relations of these areas both among themselves and with other countries of the world …[75]

As with the FAO, Foreign Office staff in London were cautious of ECAFE and the heightened interest of the UN in South-East Asian affairs.

In October 1947, the FAO took over the operations of IEFC. Up until now the IEFC Sub-Committee had worked out of Singapore in close co-operation with the Special Commission. Killearn's organisation and the IEFC shared documents, with the proceedings of the Special Commission's monthly liaison officer meetings being used to guide rice allocations set by the sub-committee. Now, with the IEFC under UN control, the future of the IEFC sub-committee staying in Singapore and its relationship with Britain's regional organisation was called in to question. In November, Killearn telegrammed the Foreign Office to further push for the FAO to establish its regional office in Singapore. He informed London that he had heard that Singapore was not even being considered as a possible location and instead the FAO were choosing between Shanghai, Bangkok, New Delhi or Calcutta. Killearn strongly believed that Singapore was the ideal location, citing its 'central position and ease of communications' with the rest of South-East Asia.

> FAO apparently recognise the need for continuity in operation of emergency organisations, such as sub-committee, and work of sub-committee will be closely bound to that of Regional Office … Foreign Consul Generals in Singapore are well versed in sub-committee machinery which is intricate and has been built up to large extent by these Consul Generals. All this work would have to be learned by other representatives if Regional Office is located elsewhere. FAO already have a nucleus in Singapore around which they could establish their Regional Office.[76]

More importantly, Killearn argued that if the FAO were to establish its regional office elsewhere in Asia, it was likely that the IEFC Sub-Committee would move with it 'thereby robbing us of our existing virtual control' over the system of rice allocation and distribution in

[75] 'Terms of Reference of ECAFE' in D. Wightman, *Towards Economic Co-Operation in Asia: The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), pp.367-368.
[76] F 15550/2/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 22 November 1947, FO 371/63499, TNA, pp.1-2.

South-East Asia.[77] The Foreign Office hoped to kill two birds with one stone. The FAO and ECAFE were working closely together, and London saw an opportunity to assert its influence over both UN organisations. Ahead of the second ECAFE session, due to open at Baguio in the Philippines in November, the Foreign Office planned for the British representatives to recommend Singapore for the site of ECAFE's temporary headquarters.[78] During the session proceedings, Britain's proposal was countered by the Chinese and Philippine delegations who wanted ECAFE to be based in their own respective countries. Unable to reach a definite conclusion, the British withdrew their recommendation, with ECAFE resolving that the decision be adjourned until the next session.[79] In communicating the resolution to Killearn, the Foreign Office still appeared confident in Britain's ability to control international interest in South-East Asia. If ECAFE were to choose Singapore as the site of its temporary headquarters, there was 'little doubt that the FAO would have followed suit'.[80]

Although unable to influence the position of ECAFE's temporary headquarters, Britain did emerge from the Baguio meeting with a small diplomatic victory regarding ECAFE's relationship with the Special Commission. Dr. P.S. Lokanathan, Executive Secretary of ECAFE, put forward a recommendation that, since the Special Commission shared some common functions with ECAFE and was concerned with a region within ECAFE's area of responsibility, 'satisfactory working relations' should be established between the two organisations. Measures included the exchange of technical information and representatives. ECAFE would send an officer to the Special Commission's monthly liaison meetings in Singapore and Killearn's

[77] F 15550/2/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 22 November 1947, FO 371/63499, TNA, p.1.
[78] The British delegation to the ECAFE Session consisted of two staff from the Foreign Office, JP Stent and Christofas.
[79] E/606, Report of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East on its first and second sessions, (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/828440?ln=en [date accessed 22 September 2023]), p.8 – It is unclear from the documents available why Britain made this decision.
[80] F 15550/2/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 18 December 1947, FO 371/63499, TNA, p.1.

organisation would be represented at ECAFE.[81] Lokanathan's proposal was not universally accepted. Soviet delegates rejected it on the grounds that, as the Special Commission was not an inter-governmental organisation, ECAFE was not required to co-operate with it. The Burmese representative, however, argued in favour of Killearn's organisation. They feared that if ECAFE were to immediately assume full responsibility for some of the Special Commission's regional obligations, such as the allocation and distribution of rice, it might disrupt the present system and cause 'untold hardship' in South-East Asia.[82] Indeed, the other members of ECAFE appeared convinced that there had to be some connection between the UN organisation and the work already undertaken by the British and resolved to adopt Lokanathan's recommendation.[83] Britain's existing bureaucratic structures therefore helped them to maintain their regional influence.

The End of British Control

By the time ECAFE reconvened in Ootacamund, India for its third session in June 1948, Killearn was back in London having been replaced by Malcolm MacDonald and his organisation superseded by the Office of the Commissioner-General. During this period, ECAFE had continued to keep its relationship with the British in South-East Asia under close assessment and had sent observers to Singapore to conduct a full survey of the work of the Special Commission early in the year. Outlining the administrative work that the British were undertaking to organise the monthly liaison meetings as well as the occasional specialised conference, the survey concluded that, except for collecting and disseminating statistics throughout South-East Asia, there was 'no risk of duplication' between the operations of ECAFE and the Special Commission.

> Other functions of the [Special Commission] are either executive or ones which the [Special Commission] is particularly well equipped to perform with its highly specialised

[81] E/CN.11/36, Relations between ECAFE and the Economic Organisation of the Special Commission in South-East Asia, 20 November 1947, (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4030737?ln=en [date accessed 22 December 2023]), pp.3-4.
[82] V. Purcell, 'The Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', *International Affairs*, 24:2, 1948, p.189.
[83] *Report of the Economic Commission*, p.11. – The Soviet delegation abstained from voting on the resolution.

> advisory staff. In neither case do these functions duplicate ECAFE's much wider co-ordinating ones to which they are complementary.[84]

As a consequence of these results, it was suggested that ECAFE maintain its present working relations with the British. Both parties should continue to appoint a liaison officer to their respective organisations and carry on exchanging information of their activities. There was, however, one caveat. Whereas the British had previously been free to organise specialised conferences devoted to a particular subject, for instance on Food (April 1946) or Nutrition (May 1946), ECAFE now requested that they be consulted about any regional conference which the British were hoping to convene in the future. This was the start of ECAFE chipping away at Britain's regional authority. Yet the British delegation to the conference did not oppose the recommendations, which were successfully passed as a resolution.

The session then turned to the deferred decision on the location of ECAFE's temporary headquarters. The representative from Malaya, supported by the British delegation, again offered Singapore as the desired location. The proposal was also again opposed by the Philippines and China. The Chinese delegation suggested that ECAFE should temporarily remain in Shanghai, where it had been provisionally headquartered since its formation, until a final decision about a permanent location had been made. As they noted, Shanghai had 'all the advantages' of the other proposed locations and the Chinese Government had already worked to make room for the temporary headquarters in the city, providing office space and accommodation for ECAFE officials. The Chinese representative argued that relocating the temporary base would 'involve expense, loss of time and delay in the work' of ECAFE. Although the New Zealand delegate contested that Shanghai was not as central to the region as the Chinese insisted, arguing in favour of Singapore if the decision was to be made on a purely geographical basis, the council voted by majority to locate the temporary headquarters in the

[84] E/CN.11/88, Survey of the Economic Organisation of the Special Commission in South-East Asia, 7 May 1948, (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4030736?ln=en [date accessed, 22 December 2023]) pp.3-4.

Chinese city.[85] Despite the continued recognition of their work, the British were unable to influence ECAFE to the extent originally hoped. As Remme has pointed out, there was an irony to this. Having garnered ECAFE's acceptance of a continued British colonial presence in South-East Asia by emphasising the importance of the humanitarian work that the Special Commission and its successor organisation of the Commissioner-General had undertaken, the British inadvertently created a situation in which the UN would eventually take on this duty, replacing them as the broker of food aid in the region. ECAFE, with a much wider scope than Britain's regional organisation, provided a forum for dissenting anti-colonial voices such as independent India and the Soviet Union to grow louder in opposing Britain's South-East Asian policies [86]

During the third ECAFE session, MacDonald and the British were faced with another challenge to Britain's regional authority: the outbreak of a communist insurgency in Malaya. On 16 June 1948, three British plantation owners and two Chinese workers were murdered by members of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), an armed guerrilla force with links to the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). In response, the British colonial government declared a state of emergency, granting itself powers to detain any person without trial, to search any property without a warrant and to limit the activities of left-wing organisations such as trade unions.[87] British Army units already stationed in the colony were drafted to work under the instruction of the Malayan police and in August 1948, MacDonald successfully requested the deployment of a further brigade of British troops to avoid the 'very serious consequences in loss of British prestige, impairing the Government's authority and reduction in the economic productivity of the country.'[88] MacDonald returned to Britain in October 1948 to brief the

[85] E/839, Report of the Third Session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, 1 July 1948, p.17. (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/828507?ln=en [date accessed, 2 October 2023]).
[86] Remme, *Britain and Regional Co-Operation in South-East Asia*¸ p.116, 118.
[87] A.J. Stockwell, *Malaya Vol.2*, p.20.
[88] DO (48) 16th Meeting, 13 August 1948, CAB 131/5, p.9.

Cabinet about the situation in Malaya. While back in the London he held a meeting with Foreign Office and Colonial Office officials about the future of his organisation. Dening, chairing the meeting, commented on the monthly Liaison Officers' Meetings in Singapore. First instigated by Killearn, MacDonald had continued the practice through his time in office. With the threat of famine in South-East Asia significantly reduced, these meetings had achieved the priority task set out to Killearn in March 1946. Dening suggested that the meetings now had no clear purpose. As he put it:

> unless some new stimulus were given to it, the Liaison Officers' Meetings would die of inanition. It had been a great achievement to draw 15 territories together to these regular meetings and it would be most unfortunate from the political viewpoint if the demise of these meetings were to be allowed, at any rate until they were absorbed in a wider machinery for political collaboration more generally.[89]

Roger Makins, Deputy Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, posited that maintaining 'harmonious working relations' with ECAFE might be this stimulus. The meeting recognised that while it was 'important not to tread on the toes' of ECAFE, the UN organisation's aims of promoting economic development and international co-operation in South-East Asia were complementary to the objectives of the British Commissioner-General.[90] The meeting concluded therefore that the monthly Liaison Officer's meetings had to be continued to display Britain's commitment to the development of South-East Asia. London referred the matter back to local officials in Singapore to work out the best way forward.

Singapore's reply was not instant. Patrick Scrivener, MacDonald's deputy and Acting Commissioner-General while his superior remained in London, opted to delay a response until the fourth ECAFE session (in Lapstone, Australia) had closed in early December 1948. Prior to the session, Scrivener and his staff believed Britain's regional organisation required strengthening. The monthly meetings were, as London feared, beginning to lose their influence. Chinese representatives had refused to discuss rice allocation at the October meeting whilst the

[89] F 15023/20/61, Record of Meeting held at the Foreign Office, 25 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.
[90] F 15023/20/61, Record of Meeting held at the Foreign Office, 25 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1

Philippine delegate had not attended at all. Scrivener admitted that these meetings, once 'essential' to Britain's control over regional rice supplies, were 'becoming less and less necessary' as much of the discussion was repeated at the IEFC Sub-Committee.[91] To revive the meetings, Scrivener suggested a change of focus, away from rice supplies and to the wider problems of social and economic development in South-East Asia. He asked London to re-employ two technical advisers who had originally been attached to Killearn's mission, the nutritional scientist Dr. Lucius Nicholls and agricultural expert, Dr. LW Jack. Scrivener emphasised that a reinforced British organisation might act as a guide to the UN agencies in the region. The role of the Commissioner-General, Scrivener argued, 'should be that of a bridge leading eventually to the complete assumption by FAO and other UN bodies' of its activities. Britain should avoid employing more of its own experts (than those Scrivener requested) in Singapore 'which would look rather like the application of artificial respiration' and instead develop the existing provision for UN personnel to work in co-operation with its regional organisation.[92]

Once the fourth ECAFE session began, however, the prospect of continued Anglo-UN collaboration in South-East Asia appeared to be diminishing. Scrivener, attending the session as an observer for the Commissioner-General, found that the British were being sidelined by the increasingly close relationship between ECAFE and the FAO. ECAFE resolved that the FAO would now hold 'primary responsibility for all questions concerning food and agriculture' in the region.[93] The FAO submitted a report to ECAFE outlining its plans for 1949 which included a nutritional conference, similar to one which the British were hoping to arrange themselves as follow-up to the conference organised by Killearn in May 1946. These

[91] F 18592/20/61, Scrivener to Grey, 22 December 1948, FO 371/69681, TNA, p.1.
[92] F 18592/20/61, Scrivener to Grey, 22 December 1948, FO 371/69681, TNA, p.1.
[93] E/CN.11/190, Report of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, covering the period 1 July 1948 to 5 April 1949 (Fourth session and the Committee of the Whole), 29 April 1949, p.48, (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/824934?ln=en [date accessed, 6 October 2023]).

developments did not lead to a reassessment of British policy but rather strengthened the view of officials in Singapore who were advocating the reinforcement of their administration in South-East Asia. Confirming his view that they should re-employ both Nicholls and Jack, Scrivener told London that it 'would be impossible for FAO to ignore the presence, and the work, of two such eminent experts, and they would represent very strong cards to our hand when it came to discussing future collaboration.'[94] Scrivener's comments drew a mixed response in the Foreign Office. Christofas minuted that London must accept that the liaison meetings 'are on their last legs' and, considering both ECAFE and the FAO's increasing regional presence, that it would be 'increasingly difficult' to keep them running.[95] Ernest JW Barnes, of the Economic Relations Department, struck a more positive tone as he argued that Britain should not be concerned about a rivalry with the FAO. The FAO could not afford to organise regional conferences and had passed a resolution urging member states to organise them for themselves. This, according to Barnes, provided 'an opportunity for the Commissioner-General to fill the breach and so to give an earnest of the UK's readiness to help and to lead technical progress' in South-East Asia.[96] Passing final comment on the matter, the Far Eastern Department's John Lloyd suggested that, despite the FAO's apparent need for support, there was nothing that Britain could do to restore the importance of its regional organisation in Singapore.

> The subjects to which the Commissioner-General can call regional conferences are limited in scope – food, social welfare, statistics, nutrition, etc … Most of the likely subjects were covered in Lord Killearn's day, and even then we were always casting around (without much success) for other likely subjects. Now that the FAO has arrived in South-East Asia to stay it will be still more difficult to find likely subjects.

[94] F 18592/20/61, Scrivener to Grey, 22 December 1948, FO 371/69681, TNA, p.2.
[95] F 18592/20/61, Minute by Christofas, 10 January 1949, FO 371/69681, TNA.
[96] F 18592/20/61, Minute by Ernest JW Barnes, 11 January 1949, FO 371/69681, TNA.

Making direct reference to the Liaison Officers' Meetings, Lloyd agreed with Christofas. Acknowledging that 'it was a pity they seem to be dying on us', he urged that London 'must face realities.'[97]

Conclusion

Indeed, it was the reality of the increased interest of the UN that spelled the ultimate end for the system of food allocation and distribution that Britain had implemented. In June 1949, the FAO passed a resolution that it would be formally abolishing the IEFC and discontinuing the international allocation of rice at the end of the year. Anticipating this, the twenty-ninth and final Liaison Officers' Meeting was held in Singapore in early November 1949. MacDonald opened the meeting by congratulating the delegates on their work over the previous three-and-a-half years.

> You averted famine … You restored order and progress to food production and distribution in this corner of the world. You kept people fed and happy in dangerous times … Your example will be followed by others. They will continue on the path which you have set. They must do so … The lesson which you have taught Asia, that individual countries cannot prosper except if they are prepared to help each other is one of such importance that it would be a disaster not only for Asia but for the world if it was forgotten.[98]

MacDonald continued with a reassertion of Britain's commitment to South-East Asia. While the Liaison Officers' Meeting were coming to an end, his organisation would still maintain a presence in Singapore.

> We shall gladly play our part in maintaining in South-East Asia international understanding and co-operation in the economic field … We shall not hesitate to suggest to your Governments the calling of special conferences when we feel that something useful can be done.[99]

As will be demonstrated consistently throughout this thesis, events beyond Britain's control severely hindered policy-makers from achieving their objectives. These failures offered a clear display of Britain's relative weakness in the face of several different factors after the Second World War such as the growth of American power, the United Nations and local nationalist

[97] F 18592/20/61, Minute by John Lloyd, 14 January 1949, FO 371/69681, TNA.
[98] *The Straits Times*, 11 November 1949, p.4.
[99] *The Straits Times*, 11 November 1949, p.4.

movements. While London wanted to maintain the Liaison Officers' Meetings and hence British co-ordination over regional food supplies, British officials had to acknowledge the growth of international interest in the allocation and distribution of rice as well as the economic development of South-East Asia. Britain's initial policy of attempting to co-opt and direct the CFB/IEFC in the region was eroded to become one of co-operation with and eventual submission to the demands of ECAFE and the FAO. The British were ultimately incapable of maintaining their authority over food supplies, conceding responsibility for the matter to the two UN agencies.

3: Malaya and Singapore

The immediate post-war period was a crucial moment for British policy in Malaya. Following the Japanese occupation and subsequent period of military administration, London set about reforming the British colonial state in Malaya and Singapore. In April 1946, the Malayan Union was formed, federalising the Malayan states into a single colony with a central government based in Kuala Lumpur. Singapore was made a crown colony, with its own government, administered separately from the Union. As such, food security in these two new colonies became deeply interlinked with the success (or possible failure) of British efforts to recast and rebuild its imperial authority in South-East Asia.

As previously examined, the post-war Labour government's approach to imperial administration was guided by the principle of trusteeship, in which the colonies required a period of British rule to assist their economic and political development, before they were deemed ready for independence. This idea that the British knew best for its colonies permeated food policy in Malaya and Singapore. Demonstrating what Bayly and Harper have described as 'an imperialism of the welfare state', the restored colonial governments involved themselves in the production, preparation, and the distribution of foodstuffs in the two colonies to avert the worst effects of the food shortage. Bayly and Harper have also highlighted, however, that the imperial welfare state lacked resources and so the emphasis was on providing instructions to local populations about best how to prepare their food rather than the outright provision of food itself.[1] Indeed, when the colonial state did take up direct responsibility for distributing food, it was not handed out for free. It was rather, as we shall see, distributed for profit. This raises questions as to the sincerity of the Labour government's rhetoric of development and humanitarian assistance to the colonies, projecting an image of post-war Britain as an altruistic colonial power. Food policy in Malaya and Singapore provided the British with an opportunity

[1] C.A. Bayly and T. Harper, *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire*, (Allen Lane: London, 2007), p.280.

to actively display these good intentions, even if they were coloured by an undercurrent of restored colonial control and the continued exploitation of Malayan natural resources.

Production

Faced with the possibility of external sources being unable to fulfil the rice requirements of Malaya and Singapore, the British sought to improve the self-sufficiency of these colonies. Since the end of 1945, British authorities in Malaya had undertaken a programme to increase food production. Their plan maintained the practice of the Japanese occupiers which had seen government forest reserves and rubber estates cut down and replanted with tapioca. In some instances, this involved the forced resettlement of civilians from urban areas to provide the required agricultural labour.[2] A large majority of those moved by the Japanese were Chinese and, in many cases, they chose to remain on their new land once the occupation was over, and were referred to as 'squatters' by the restored British administration.[3] The policy of the British Military Administration (BMA) in Malaya was to grant concessions to these people, allowing them to stay rent free on their acquired land and keep growing food. Under BMA rule, all government land cleared and planted under the Japanese had to remain under cultivation for a further two years. The BMA had also suggested that the owners of private rubber plantations follow the administration's example and allow these settlers to remain on their properties too.[4]A Colonial Office brief acknowledged that this policy was hardly an ideal solution because the increased production of substitute rice products had come at the expense of the rubber industry. Furthermore, certain foodstuffs were thought to be unsuitable for the local population. Tapioca, for instance was 'being produced in sufficient quantities to save the population of the

[2] P. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History*, (London: Hurst & Co, 1997), p.260; 279-383.

[3] The practice of squatting has a long history in Malaya. Originally defined as illegal occupiers of land, by the 1940s the term had come to encompass all rural Chinese peasants. See K.S. Sandhu, 'The Saga of the "Squatter" in Malaya: A Preliminary Survey of the Causes, Characteristics and Consequences of the Resettlement of Rural Dwellers during the Emergency between 1948 and 1960', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 5:1, 1964, pp.145-146.

[4] 1, BMA (M) to Colonial Office, 15 December 1945, CO 852/268/8, TNA, p.1.

countryside from death by literal starvation, though not from death by the disease of under-nourishment' such as beriberi, a life-threatening condition caused by vitamin deficiency. Manioc, or cassava, was both 'poor in nutritive qualities' and 'markedly unpalatable.'[5] Malaya's terrain was unsuited for the intensive farming of alternative cereal crops such as maize as a substitute for rice. Faced with a deficit in the domestic production of rice, the continued cultivation of other foodstuffs, however unpalatable metaphorically, was a necessity to ensure the food situation did not worsen.

Considering the rice shortages experienced between January and March 1946, the Combined Food Board revised its allocations for South-East Asian territories for the next quarter. Malaya was provisionally allocated 69,000 tons of rice for the period from April to June. In response to this revision, the Malayan Government were forced to consider further cuts to its rice ration. Malaya and Singapore had been distributing rice on a basis of 7.5 and 10.5 ounces per capita per day respectively. The new CFB allocation would mean that the two colonies would have to reduce their rations to 5.5 ounces. This meant that the populations of Malaya and Singapore would only be receiving 550 calories from cereals, 55% of the 1,200-calorie figure that the British held as a minimum to prevent disease and unrest.[6] The colonial government in Malaya had already slashed its rice ration in December 1945 to protect stock levels and the shortage of rice shipments from Siam throughout the first quarter of 1946 only added to the administration's difficulties. In April 1946, Franklin Gimson, the newly appointed Governor of Singapore, complained to his superiors in London, saying:

> I have gained the impression that Malaya is in danger of being penalised for having cautious rationing policy … lack of supply and uncertainty of the position generally, had led us to adopt, despite its nutritional dangers, a most cautious rationing programme to ensure that we should not have to inflict on the public any further cut after the drastic cut of last December. We have, in fact, now achieved by this caution, the position that we can continue our existing ration scales throughout the second quarter …

[5] 14, Extract from Colonial Office Brief 'Note on the Production of Foodstuffs for Local Consumption (other than rice) in the British Territories in the Far East', 12 March 1946, CO 852/268/8, TNA, pp.1-2.
[6] F 5788/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 15 April 1946, FO 371/53860, TNA, p.1.

Indeed, the previous cuts made to Malaya's rice ration gave the appearance that the colony's rice stock was far healthier than other territories with claims on Siamese rice. Gimson went on:

> We have now found that other territories have been, and are issuing cereals at higher rates than Malaya, with the results that Malaya's position is jeopardised by the fact her stock state now seems better than theirs … If we increase our ration scale, we imperil our stock which we have achieved only be self denial to insure continuance of a steady ration … we are now being forced into the invidious position of having to sacrifice Malaya in answer to appeals to humanity by territories which have consumed their allocation as received.[7]

Indeed, when the Joint Supply Board provided London with updated statistics, they estimated that Malaya had 20,035 tons of rice in stock. Should the colony receive no more, and the government attempt to maintain the minimum requirement to prevent disease and unrest, Malaya would be out of rice by 30 April. Rice presently under shipment to Malaya would cover a further 38 days. The rice situation deteriorated further over the course of the month. A third survey was undertaken on 28 April which highlighted the need to import more rice. While present stocks would now last until 21 May 1946, expected imports would only provide for another 13 days.[8]

In response to this Killearn exhorted British colonial and military governments in the region to do more to increase domestic food production. Despite the possibility that Malaya might have to reduce its daily rice ration to 3.5 ounces, Killearn had been informed that the total acreage of substitute foodstuffs, such as tapioca and sweet potatoes, was decreasing. All the cajoling he could undertake would be futile if there was no tangible improvement to local food production, he argued, stating to the colonial governors they all shared a responsibility to see that 'performance matches or exceeds promise', and reminding them that 'God helps him who helps himself.'[9] Killearn's intervention drew much comment from the Colonial Office in London. The Colonial Office recognised the difficulties of maintaining high levels of food production in the face of pressure from business interest groups such as the Malayan Rubber

[7] F 6265/3/61, Franklin Gimson to Hall, 19 April 1946, FO 371/53862, TNA, pp.1-3.
[8] F 6380/3/61, KC Tours to Hall, 19 April and 3 May 1946, FO 371/53863, TNA, p.1.
[9] F 7454/3/61, Killearn to the Governors of Malaya, Ceylon, Burma, and Hong Kong; British Military Administration (Borneo); and War Office, 16 May 1946, FO 371/53870, TNA, p.1.

Estate Owners Company (MREOC) whose members wanted their former plantation land returned from the Chinese settlers. For all their insistence on developing Malaya's natural resources, the British state, still recovering from the Second World War, could not provide the capital necessary for this to take place and looked to private business for support.[10] Hence, when it came to choosing between food or rubber production, the interests of business tended to overrule humanitarian need.

The gradual restoration of the Malayan economy also presented a problem. The economies in the ports of Penang and Singapore had begun to be revived by the return of international trade. This resulted in many squatters beginning to leave their farmland and move to cities, inspired by better employment prospects offered in these urban areas. Considering this, London expressed its doubt as to the ability of the colonial administration to keep 'unwilling squatters' on their farms. The two-year grace period of free rent was the limit of what Britain was prepared to concede. The Treasury, keen to see Malaya's rubber exports (and hence the colony's capacity as a dollar-earner) restored, had opposed the concessions made by the BMA.[11] Indeed, it was suggested to George Hall, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that keeping the Chinese employed in food production 'might not be for the benefit of the economy of Malaya as a whole.'[12] The Treasury and Colonial Office insistence on rehabilitating Malaya's industrial output, especially rubber, for further economic exploitation thus took precedence over food production. This appears contradictory. Malaya's minimum food requirements had been drawn up with the expressed intention of maintaining a suitable diet to feed labourers who would be undertaking the restorative physical work of increasing production and export of Malaya's profitable natural resources. With elements of Whitehall unwilling to allow the transfer of more land for food production, Killearn and other British diplomats in

[10] White, *Business, Government and the End of Empire: Malaya 1942-1957*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.70.
[11] 2, Treasury to Colonial Office, 10 January 1946, CO 852/268/8, TNA, p.1.
[12] 19, Colonial Office Minute, n.d., CO 852/268/8, TNA, p.2.

South-East Asia were forced into increasing their efforts to procure rice from external sources, hence explaining the rationale behind the concessions made to Burma, Siam, and French Indochina to provide enough food for Malaya.

There were, however, other departments in London, such as the Ministry of Food, which did support the plan to improve food production in Malaya. Rubber and tin were not the colony's only exportable products, and food produce had also played a key part in its pre-war economy. In 1940, the export of coconuts and its by-products were worth just over £1 million. The value of exports of tinned pineapples were similar, totalling £1.16 million in 1939.[13] The Ministry of Food wanted to see food exports from Malaya restored and explored the possibility of using Killearn to promote this objective on their behalf in South-East Asia. They approached the Colonial Office for comment on this. The Ministry justified their approach as a counter to American criticism that the British had 'not been active enough' in their efforts to restore food production in its colonial territories in South-East Asia.[14] A draft telegram was circulated in which Killearn was asked to assist in the rehabilitation of food exports from Malaya. Gerard Clauson, Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, pushed back against this, resisting further encroachment on the work of colonial administration. Clauson argued that Malayan food production was 'no concern' to Killearn, who was 'a co-ordinator only and is already raising quite enough ill will as it is.'[15]

In the face of Colonial Office reticence in Whitehall and a poor relationship with the colonial governments of Malaya and Singapore, Killearn was forced to look elsewhere for support of his plan to rehabilitate Malaya's food industry. He wrote to Lord Nathan, Chair of the Cabinet South-East Asia Food Supply Committee, that 'no adequate progress' was being made in his drive to grow more food in Malaya and suggested that administrators in the colony

[13] *Annual Report on the Malayan Union – 1947*, (HMSO: Kuala Lumpur, 1949), pp.37-38. Original figures given in Malayan Dollars. Exchange rate was fixed at 1 M$ to 2s4d.
[14] 33, ARW Harrison to TW Davies, 27 May 1946, CO 852/268/8, TNA, p.1.
[15] 33, Minute by Clauson, 30 May 1946, CO 852/268/8, TNA.

neither 'appreciate the gravity of issues at stake nor take them sufficiently seriously.'[16] Killearn told Nathan that he would be approaching Malcolm MacDonald, the Governor-General of the Malayan Union and Singapore, for assistance. The son of former Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, Malcolm Macdonald had experience of British colonial politics, having twice served as Secretary of State for the Colonies (1935 and 1938-40) and Dominion Affairs (1935-38 and 1938-39) and recently concluded a term as the British High Commissioner to Canada. Although officially appointed in January 1946, MacDonald finally arrived in Singapore at the end of May to co-ordinate Colonial Office policy for the two colonies. Given their overlapping remits and the existing tensions between their respective departments in Whitehall, Killearn and MacDonald struck up what A.J. Stockwell has described as a 'remarkably harmonious' working relationship.[17] Staff in the Foreign Office expressed unease with Killearn taking up the food issue with MacDonald, going above the individual governments of the Malayan Union and of Singapore and intervening in the internal affairs of the colonies. The Foreign Office hoped that Killearn's criticisms of the half-hearted efforts of the colonial governments to support his regional food drive would not become too vociferous. Colonial governments were 'touchy'. Should their relations with Killearn become too strained it may be difficult for him, and the Foreign Office by extension, to maintain a presence in Singapore.[18] Others, however, suggested that Killearn was well within his right to raise these criticisms. No one in the Foreign Office with prior experience of collaborating with colonial officials 'will be surprised to hear that some of them are half-asleep', as one official put it. As long as these criticisms were tactfully made to MacDonald then there was little risk of trouble.[19]

[16] F 10964/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 27 July 1946, FO 371/53896, TNA, p.1
[17] A.J. Stockwell, 'In Search of Regional Authority in South-East Asia: The Improbable Partnership of Lord Killearn and Malcolm MacDonald, 1946-8' in A. Best (ed.), *Britain's Retreat from Empire in East Asia 1905-1980*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p.117.
[18] F 10964/3/61, Minute by Errock, 30 July 1946, FO 371/53896, TNA.
[19] F 10964/3/61, Minute by Whitteridge, 30 July 1946, FO 371/53896, TNA.

Killearn and MacDonald began to make public appearances together to encourage greater food production in Malaya. In early August 1946, with regional rice shortages predicted to worsen, both attended an agricultural show in Kuala Lumpur at which MacDonald gave a speech. He stressed the importance of increasing Malaya's domestic food output. Increasing food production would diversify the Malayan economy, he said, improving the colony's resilience should the tin and rubber markets collapse. This could only be achieved through increasing the production of food for both domestic consumption and export.

> Every field of rice, every patch of vegetables, every bunch of fruit and every basket of poultry that could be produced would help to carry people through a period of scarcity following the war into the abundance of peace.[20]

MacDonald's speech was followed up with a state radio broadcast from Killearn on 21 August in which he stressed the seriousness of the food crisis to the Malayan population. Aware he was speaking to people 'who have suffered privation and hunger during the Japanese occupation' and were now threatened with this again, Killearn began

> [I] am going to be very frank with you tonight … World food crisis has suddenly appeared in our midst here like an enemy in our camp whom we have kept outside the defences till now … You will know that the worst three months are stealing upon us.[21]

He then detailed the efforts of Burma and Siam to increase rice exports to Malaya and Singapore, whilst also asserting that his presence in South-East Asia was the greatest proof of the deep feeling of responsibility that the British Government felt for the citizens of its colonial territories. He drew comparisons between the present rationing of rice in Malaya to the wartime rationing of food in Britain, explaining to his listeners that this was actually still in place and, because of the world cereals shortage, how the British Government had begun to ration bread despite not having to do so during the war. He also highlighted the fact that the British themselves had not resumed the domestic importing of rice since the end of the war in an attempt to improve

[20] *The Straits Times*, 4 August 1946, p.1.
[21] F 12128/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 20 August 1946, FO 371/53902, TNA, p.1.

availability in South-East Asia. That this sacrifice was being made 'willingly' by Britain 'should be an inspiration to one and all' in Malaya and Singapore to persevere through the ongoing food shortage. These comments can be seen as another British tactic to display their supposed commitment to the welfare of the people of Malaya and Singapore by making themselves look self-sacrificing in the face of problems in the empire. Killearn returned to the argument that Malayans could be undertaking further work to help themselves, especially regarding improving food production and decreasing waste.

> Grow more food yourselves, waste less food; find out (and it is very easy) what foods other than rice will keep you going and eat them, even if you are not in the habit of doing so. Coconuts in various forms, vegetables, sweet potatoes, yes, and even tapioca. They may save your health and they may build up your children's.[22]

Killearn's broadcast exemplified the patronising colonial mindset which implied that native populations were incapable of looking after themselves. In promoting the sacrifices that they were making, the British were attempting to justify a continued (and intensified) period of rule over Malaya.

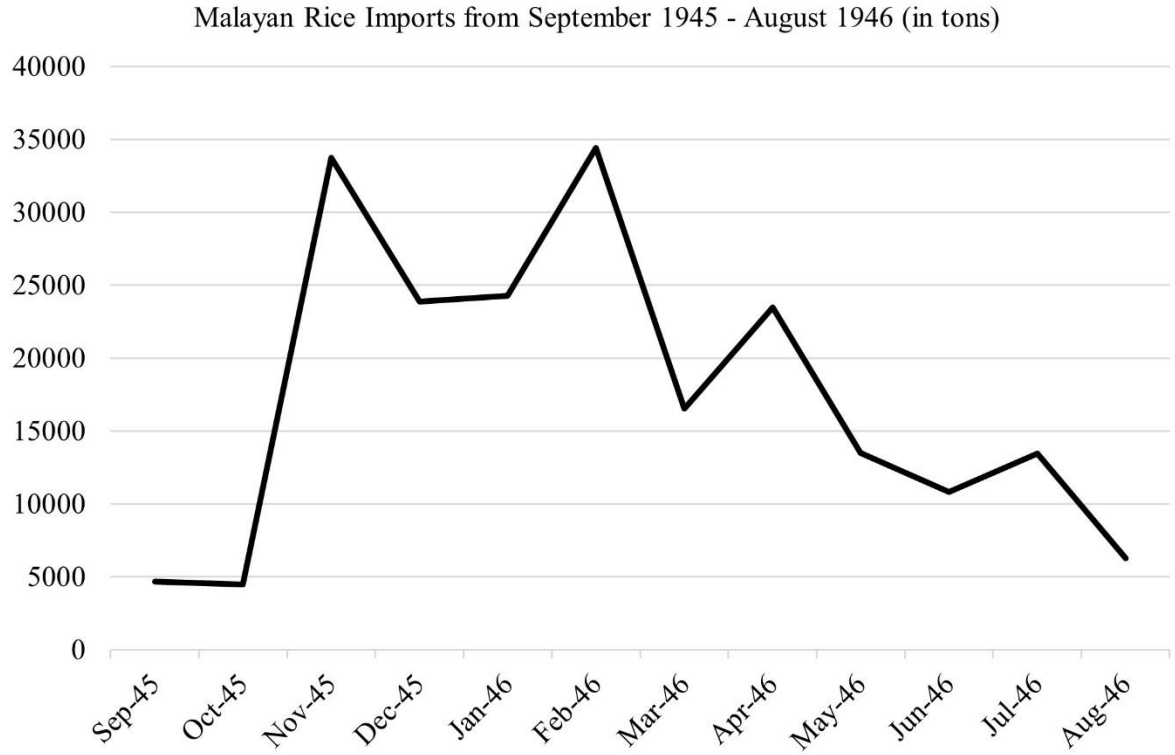

Figure 1 - Malayan Rice Imports from September 1945 - August 1946, F 12912/3/61, MacDonald to Hall, 2 September 1946, FO 371/53911, TNA..

[22] F 12128/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 20 August 1946, FO 371/53902, TNA, p.4.

Killearn's speech, however, was not without context. Given the decline in rice deliveries to Malaya and Singapore from May (Figure 1), the governments of the colonies were forced to cut the rice ration even further to make what little stock they had last. Franklin Gimson, Governor of Singapore, described the situation as a 'calamity' to Hall, informing the Colonial Secretary that both he and his counterpart in the Malayan Union, Edward Gent, had agreed to cut their rice rations from 3.5 to 2.3 ounces from 18 August.[23] In Singapore, the reduction was even more drastic. For men, it was nearly halved, down from 7 to 3.8 ounces and for women, reduced from 4.6 ounces to three.[24] Alongside this, Gimson warned London of a deteriorating political situation in Singapore. Strikes had now become a daily occurrence in the colony and by mid-August over 4,000 workers in both the dockyard and rubber industry were on strike demanding higher wages because the cost of living had risen, including the price of rice.[25]. The local population's reluctance to eat more alternative foodstuffs, such as sweet potatoes, drove the price of rice even higher. This reluctance, in turn, contributed to the growth of an increasingly profitable black market trade in rice in the colony. 'Unless the cereal ration can be increased' Gimson wrote 'there is the possibility of serious deterioration in maintenance and order.'[26]

With civil unrest a real possibility and the rice ration slumping to its lowest level since occupation, locals in Malaya and Singapore began to voice their dissent at Killearn's organisation. Days after his broadcast, letters appeared in the local press expressing their displeasure. One, signed off 'Sans Rice, Singapore', read as follows:

> What has our Special Commissioner's enormous establishment been doing all this while? … seems to be so busy working out the calorific values of kangkong [water spinach] and coconut that they had little time to watch the deteriorating position of our depleting rice stock … if this is all that [Killearn] can do for us it is quite time he handed over his charge to a Class II officer of the MCS and left us.[27]

[23] F 11807/3/61, Gimson to Hall, 12 August 1946, FO 371/53901, TNA, p.1.
[24] F 11900/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 16 August 1946, FO 371/53901, TNA. p.1.
[25] *The Singapore Free Press*, 16 August 1946, p.1.
[26] F 11807/3/61, Gimson to Hall, 12 August 1946, FO 371/53901, TNA, p.6.
[27] *The Straits Times,* 26 August 1946, p.4.

Another, published under the pseudonym 'Alice in Wonderland' took aim at the somewhat patronising tone of Killearn's broadcast. Described as 'a waste of his breath and of our time listening', they complained that Killearn was presenting a fictitious interpretation of the present situation in Malaya.

> He said the Japs took away all the rice for their army during the war. But we had more rice to eat during the occupation than now … Killearn said that other countries are denying themselves so that we can have our rice. This is pure nonsense and we Malayans are tired of this kind of benevolent talk. Please stop telling us stories so that we can sleep better without them.[28]

Both these extracts highlight the growing unrest within the Malayan population towards Britain's efforts to prevent famine and British colonial rule more widely. For all of Britain's attempts to project its famine relief policy as altruistic and humanitarian, Malayan civilians were seeing through the rhetoric. The fact that some were even prepared to suggest that food had been more readily available under the Japanese shows that British needed to do much more to convince Malayans that the post-war restoration of British colonial rule was being undertaken in their interest. The extent to which the Killearn himself was at fault for falling rice imports is, of course, doubtful, but these comments show how Britain's inability to control food production was leading to growing resentment among the Malayan population. While domestic food production remained minimal, Malaya and Singapore were dependent on outside sources, notably Siam, to meet its treaty obligations to Britain and match the availabilities they had given to the International Emergency Food Council (IEFC) from which Malaya's allocations had been devised.

Killearn was keen to remind London of this and on the same day as his radio broadcast he telegrammed the Foreign Office with his own review of the rice import situation. A total of 4,800 tons of rice were ready for shipment from Bangkok and should arrive in Malaya before the end of August, he said, with a further 6,900 tons scheduled for early September. These

[28] *The Straits Times,* 26 August 1946, p.4.

shipments would not, however, allow the rice ration to be brought up to its previous level and only guaranteed that the present reduced amount could be maintained until the end of September. Malaya and Singapore were living on a 'ship to mouth' basis. It was, therefore, a matter of prime importance to get as much rice to the two colonies as swiftly possible to restore ration scales and reduce the risk of civil disturbance.[29]

In September, MacDonald, together with Gimson and Gent, wrote to the Colonial Office with suggestions to increase available rice supplies in Malaya. Their methods ranged from asking India and Ceylon to give up a proportion of their claims on rice from Burma for Malaya, to restoring overland trade with Siam across the northern border to relieve pressure on shipping, and also to suggesting that the British pursue a reduction in International Emergency Food Council (IEFC) allocations for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and to the Chinese government, likening the unrationed distribution of rice in China to 'pouring water down a sink.'[30] Notably absent from colonial planning was the suggestion that Malaya itself could do more to produce its own food. Killearn, however, still felt that the colony had an important role to play. He wrote to Nathan that he would be asking Gent and Gimson to introduce a government scheme for the compulsory requisitioning of rice. The black market trade in rice was evidence of an available surplus of domestic crop, which Killearn estimated to be around 300,000 tons.[31] The colonial governments were simply not doing enough to get their hands on it, he argued. Detailing his plan to the two governors, Killearn urged that the colonial governments seek to acquire all available domestic stocks of rice, either through compulsory purchase direct from the cultivator or the requisitioning of stocks held by merchants. The fact that they had not been doing so before was a cause of embarrassment for Britain, given

[29] F 12213/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 21 August 1946, FO 371/53903, TNA, pp.1-2.
[30] F 12912/3/61, MacDonald to Hall, 2 September 1946, FO 371/53911, TNA, pp.4-6.
[31] F 12893/3/61, Killearn to Nathan, 4 September 1946, FO 371/53909, TNA, p.1.

that other South-East Asian states had undertaken such measures and had led to criticism of British policy at the IEFC.

> The Governments of Siam and Burma are already taking measures to requisition stocks in the hands of private owners. It is therefore becoming increasingly odd that similar or analogous measures are not being taken by rice deficit countries to acquire stocks of rice on their own territories.[32]

Killearn's telegram was picked up by Nathan's Cabinet South-East Asia Food Supply (SEAF) Committee. Nathan asked the Colonial Office representatives if there was an official scheme for requisitioning rice in Malaya. From a practical point of view, such a scheme would provide a more accurate reflection of available domestic rice supplies, allowing the government to make more equal distribution from this source. A clearer idea of the internal rice situation, Nathan implied, would make it more likely that British requests for improving Malaya's IEFC rice allocation would be accepted. Nathan did, however, explicitly criticise the efforts of the Government of Malaya to seek alternative foodstuffs to imported rice as he described the colonial administration as 'unreceptive to new ideas' and lacking both initiative and imagination.[33] The Colonial Office defended Malaya's position. As has been discussed in previous chapters, whereas Britain had provided the Siamese Government with consumer goods to encourage farmers and merchants to sell their crops, it had not afforded the same privilege to one of its own colonies. The restored civilian administration had only been in place six months and did not have the staff required to perform a nationwide requisitioning programme for rice crops. These two factors, coupled with Malaya's dependence on imported food supplies 'naturally circumscribed the ability of the Government of Malaya to make constructive suggestions towards the alleviation of their food problems.'[34]

[32] F 12938/3/61, Killearn to the Governors of the Malayan Union, Singapore, Borneo and Sarawak, 5 September 1946, FO 371/53909, TNA,, p.1.
[33] SEAF (46) 19th Meeting, 6 September 1946, CAB 134/677, TNA, p.7.
[34] SEAF (46) 19th Meeting, 6 September 1946, CAB 134/677, TNA, p.8.

Preparation

Killearn and the Special Commission were not only focused on improving Malayan food production. As elsewhere in the post-war Empire, British policy-makers took on an increased interest in the nutritional health of colonial populations in South-East Asia. This was not a new phenomenon nor was it entirely altruistic. In the inter-war period, the Colonial Office had undertaken a three-year survey of nutrition across Britain's empire, examining the diets of colonial populations. The results, published in 1939, stressed native 'ignorance' regarding food as one of the main causes of malnutrition whilst also emphasising Britain's ability to solve the problem through the 'deployment of appropriate expertise' such as doctors, nutritionists and agriculturalists from the metropole to the colonies.[35] British concern for the nutritional health of its colonial subjects was not solely a medical matter. The British state had an economic interest in ensuring that its people remained fit and healthy and hence able to work.[36] This was especially so for Malaya and Singapore after the war, given the importance Britain had placed on restoring production of the colonies' profitable natural resources. When it came to Malaya, the Colonial Office survey found most inhabitants to be under-nourished.

> Physique and stamina appear to be inferior when judged by European standards … the diet of the Malay is deficient in energy value, in first class protein, and in the B vitamins. The rural people, especially, live on 'the verge of safety', and consequently, any unusual demands upon the slender stamina tend to produce some form of deficiency disease.[37]

This was explicitly linked to the method of preparing rice. In rural areas, rice was grown and consumed locally, prepared by hand. Rice sold on the commercial market in towns and cities was milled, polished, and washed (a process which removed the more nutritive husk, bran, and germ) leaving behind a refined white grain. Because of this, white rice was much more expensive than unmilled brown rice. Consumption of white rice had become a symbol of wealth

[35] *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire – Part I*, Cmd.6050, (London: HMSO, 1939), p.155; M. Warboys, 'The Discovery of Colonial Malnutrition between the Wars' in D. Arnold (ed.), *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.221.
[36] See W. Anderson, 'The Third World Body' in R. Cooter and J. Picktone (eds.), *Medicine in the Twentieth Century*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 235–45.
[37] *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire – Part II*, Cmd. 6051. (London: HMSO, 1939), pp.59-60.

in Malaya. Malayan officials recognised that an increasing death rate from beriberi had coincided with an increase in the general prosperity of the colony. This could only be explained by improved purchasing power which was allowing more people to 'indulge' in eating white rice, as the 1939 report put it. It concluded that it therefore was better to live on a 'poor man's diet' based on husked brown rice than a 'supposedly better class diet' of white rice.[38]

The effects of the Japanese occupation had led to increased malnutrition in Malaya. Following liberation, the British Military Administration (BMA) conducted a clinical survey of over 20,000 people in the states of Penang, Malacca, and Selangor which took in a cross-section of the population across different classes, from office clerks to rubber estate labourers. While the results found no evidence of starvation, there was widespread malnutrition. In some sections of Malayan society, especially the poorest, a 30 per cent increase in cases of serious malnutrition was observed during the seven-month period of BMA rule from September 1945 to March 1946. The survey explicitly linked the condition of Malayan people with British efforts to rehabilitate the colony.

> The people of Malaya were, in fact, on the minimum nutritional level which could permit the Government of the country to function. They were not able to afford any further reduction in the quantity or quality of the food and any such reduction could not have failed to have bad serious effects on the health of the people and seriously to have jeopardised its chances of economic recovery.[39]

It was concluded that the 'first necessity' of the restored British civil administration was to increase the calorific intake of the population through increasing cereal production. To achieve this, the Kampong Malay, the rural farming class, would themselves need a suitable diet to successfully carry out the increased labour. The BMA suggested that this food was, in fact, already available. Symptomatic of the at best paternal and at worst patronising attitude which informed the restoration of British colonial rule in Malaya, it was argued all that was required

[38] *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire – Part II*, Cmd. 6051. (London: HMSO, 1939), pp.59-60.
[39] G. Bourne, 'Nutrition Work in Malaya under the British Military Administration', *International Review of Vitamin Research*, 21, 1949, p.303.

was to properly educate farmers on how to get the most out of their food, encouraging the consumption of undermilled rice, vegetables and fruit.[40] In the context of the post-war food shortage, therefore, the task was to persuade the population of Malaya to change their consumption habits as a means of overcoming it rather than to understand broad problems in Malayan society or with British rule.

The British authorities may have believed they had the population's interests at the centre of their thinking in basing their approach on quantitative studies, but this only reinforced their patronising approach. At the preliminary Liaison Officer's meeting held in Singapore in March, Killearn invited Dr Lucius Nicholls, the nutritional adviser attached to the Special Commission, to give a statement. Drawing on his experience in Ceylon and his preliminary work from the short time he had spent in Malaya and Singapore prior to the conference, Nicholls stressed the necessity of acquiring accurate scientific information to guide famine relief policy. This information had to be obtained through undertaking nutritional and dietary surveys of South-East Asian populations. Nutritional surveys would assess the health of the populations, searching for physical symptoms of vitamin deficiency such as dry and broken skin, sore mouths and spongy gums, and stunted growth amongst children. Nicholls warned of a tendency to misinterpret signs of malnutrition among labourers. Weakness and lack of energy were 'likely to be unjustly called laziness.' Recognising the economic importance of a fit and healthy workforce to the post-war rehabilitation of South-East Asia, Nicholls reminded the meeting that 'a country cannot prosper with feeble labourers.'[41] His comments mirrored Britain's paternalist rhetoric about post-war imperial policy, that these nutritional and dietary surveys were being undertaken for the good of South-East Asian peoples.

[40] Bourne, 'Nutrition Work in Malaya', p.304.
[41] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes; Appendix B, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.1.

> We are concerned with the future; and this is a great opportunity when far reaching changes may be started for the improvement of the health and vigour of the populations of South-East Asia.[42]

One of these 'far reaching changes' was to recommend the wider parboiling, soaking and steaming of paddy as a means of preparing rice for consumption. Parboiling resulted in more nutritive rice being produced. Soaking paddy in water drew soluble nutrients out of the husk and bran which, when steamed, would then be absorbed by the edible grain through the heat and pressure. Already common practice in India and to a lesser extent in Burma, British policy-makers sought to normalise this process throughout the region.

Changing eating habits to improving the nutrition of South-East Asian populations had been discussed as a possible method to relieve some of the burden of food supply within the Foreign Office earlier in the year. Surveying the regional food situation, Robert H. Scott, of the Far Eastern Department, first suggested trying to encourage the consumption of unmilled brown rice in early 1946. Scott himself had spent the Second World War in Japanese captivity and therefore had experienced food shortages first hand. He argued that Britain should make it illegal for rice producing countries to mill rice under the justification that it would 'not only increase nutritive value but tend to decrease consumption if there is any alternative food available.'[43] Forcing such a drastic change onto local culinary practice was, however, criticised by some of the conference delegates. Empson asked the conference if it was possible to legally prohibit the over-milling of rice to increase yield. While the Indian Government had been able to legislate against this under the terms of the 1939 Defence of India Act, the conference concluded that it would be difficult to enforce a ban on over-milling rice throughout South-East Asia.[44] Indeed, this was an absurd suggestion from the outset but the fact that it was even put forward highlights how some policy-makers in Whitehall still held on to the old imperial

[42] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes; Appendix B, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.2.
[43] F 2791/3/61, Memorandum on Food Situation in South-East Asia, 22 February 1946, FO 371/53841, TNA, p.1.
[44] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.17.

mindset that the British could do as they please in South-East Asia with little or no reference to local opinion.

Despite acknowledging that enforcing any change to rice milling practices would be difficult, the topic remained a focus of discussion at the conference. Dr William Clyde, Killearn's food adviser, agreed with Nicholls' analysis that the regional practice of heavily milling rice was a wasteful process which held 'inherent dangers of malnutrition'.[45] Heavy milling resulted in a significant proportion of paddy being lost, leaving an average of around 65 per cent of the harvested crop for food. It was suggested that lightly milling paddy would improve results, producing approximately 70 per cent. Better yet would be to produce brown rice by leaving the paddy unmilled but removing the husk. This would result in 74 per cent of paddy being fit for consumption. As unmilled rice also contained more vitamins, a smaller amount was needed to achieve a suitable level of nutrition. By encouraging South-East Asian populations to lightly mill their paddy, British policy-makers believed it would allow them to stretch even further what minimal stocks of rice they had available to distribute. The Food and Nutrition Committee agreed to put forward the following resolution to the main conference in April.

> Where rice is the staple article of diet for a population, the Conference suggests that lightly milled or parboiled rice should be used and recommends that all possible action be taken to encourage the production and use of lightly milled or parboiled rice. This will ensure that all available rice is used to the best advantage.

On top of this, it was also suggested that a nutritional adviser be permanently attached to the Special Commission and that every territory, both British and foreign, within Killearn's remit undertake nutritional and dietary surveys of their population.[46] When the resolution was presented to the April Liaison Officers' Meeting, the conclusion reached had wider implications

[45] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes of Committee on Food and Nutrition, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.1.
[46] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes of Committee on Food and Nutrition, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA, p.1.

than originally envisaged. In discussions, Clyde had pointed out that, while valuable to the individual governments, the information gathered through these surveys would be even better utilised if the results were pooled on a regional basis. It was agreed that a new conference, dedicated solely to nutrition in South-East Asia, was to be organised and held in Singapore in May.[47]

Beginning on 13 May, the Nutrition Conference was attended by Killearn and staff from the Special Commission, including Clyde and Nicholls, as well as representatives from the governments of Australia, Burma, Ceylon, French Indochina, Hong Kong, India, the Malayan Union, and Singapore. The first session opened with summaries from each delegate regarding the nutritional condition of their respective populations. Representatives for the Malayan Union stated that while conditions in the colony had improved greatly in the eight months following liberation, there was still 'much undernourishment and ill health due to deficiencies in diet.'[48] Their counterparts in Singapore gave a similar review.

> While there has been widespread and marked improvement in the nutritional status of the people since the Japanese capitulation in September 1945, the immediate future appears to be the problem … While gross signs of malnutrition such as beriberi are not to be found now on a wider scale, minor avitaminosis [diseases resulting from vitamin deficiency] is still to be found easily.[49]

In discussing possible remedies to this, the conference referred to the recent experience of Japanese occupation. Four of the delegates, including all the representatives of the Malayan Union, had been interned by the Japanese in the notorious Changi Jail and Sime Road Camps in Singapore. Dr F. E. Byron, from the Medical Services of the Malayan Union, presented the conference with his observations from his time in Changi. Recognising that the prisoners would not starve on the food provided by the Japanese, Byron told the Conference that the greatest

[47] F 6608/3/61, Minutes of the April Conference on Food, 15 April 1946, FO 371/53865, TNA, p.7.
[48] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition; Appendix A – Reports of the Delegates on the State of Nutrition in the Territories they Represent, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.23
[49] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition; Appendix A – Reports of the Delegates on the State of Nutrition in the Territories they Represent, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, pp.23-24.

concern of the medical professionals in the camps was malnutrition. Unable to grow enough food to avert this, the internees persuaded the Japanese to allow them to purchase rice millings (the removed husks and bran) which were largely available, being viewed as only suitable for animal feed by both the Malay population and the Japanese occupiers. From July 1942, these millings were issued at first to male prisoners at a rate of 1.6 ounces per day, being mixed in with every meal. While Byron admitted that there was 'much grumbling at the taste of so much rice polishings … gradually people got to like the flavour' and, more importantly, the daily Vitamin B intake of male internees more than trebled. From July 1943, the Japanese halted the issue of rice millings; however. the British had been able to build up stocks which meant that supplies would last through to November. During this five month period, rice millings were issued at a rate of two-thirds of an ounce per day to every internee – man, woman, or child – in the camp 'with great benefit to all.'[50] Indeed, the experience of Japanese occupation had left the medical professionals utterly convinced about the importance of getting as much nutritive value out of available foodstuffs as possible during times of shortage, holding the incorporation of rice millings into the everyday diet of internees as the main factor in preventing an outbreak of beriberi in the prison camps, signs of which had been evident before this occurred.[51] It is ironic that British policy-makers were considering employing practices learnt during the brutal Japanese occupation in order to overcome the difficulties that they themselves were now facing with regard to food supply.

With this in mind, the Conference closed with a discussion of measures to prevent malnutrition. In discussing Byron's report, the Conference concluded that the experience of internment had shown that the most important foods for preventing malnutrition in South-East Asia were 'husked or lightly milled rice, and rice millings, other cereals, starchy root vegetables,

[50] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Appendix C – Nutrition of Internees in Changi Gaol and Sime Road Camp during the Japanese Occupation, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.26
[51] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Appendix C – Nutrition of Internees in Changi Gaol and Sime Road Camp during the Japanese Occupation, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.27.

green leafy vegetables, pulses, vegetable oils and fish.' An eleven-point plan was drawn up, reiterating the need both to issue as much husked or lightly milled rice as possible as well as introduce 'starchy substitutes' of sweet potatoes and yams to local diets when cereals were in short supply.[52] Key recommendations were made regarding the continuation of nutritional and dietary surveys in each territory as well as giving support to all publicity efforts intended to improve the local production of foodstuffs throughout South-East Asia. On top of this, it was agreed that programmes of communal feeding should be introduced where possible. Already common in workplaces, it was suggested that provision be extended to the wider population through communal feeding schemes such as the so-called 'People's Restaurants' and mobile canteens. The benefits of this would be two-fold. Firstly, the equitable distribution of food would be achieved. Secondly, it allowed for the colonial state to make direct intervention in the dietary habits of certain groups, supplying citizens with a more balanced diet which reduced the chances of malnutrition while offering the opportunity to persuade people 'by way of practical demonstration' to eat unfamiliar foods like sweet potatoes.[53]

The most heated discussions at the nutrition conference, however, related to the previously contested topic of the milling of rice. A paper was circulated outlining the status of rice milling in Malaya. Any amount of good quality paddy should return around 70 per cent in rice once milled, the report stated, the rest being the proportion of broken grain, bran and husk. While the average rice return from government-owned mills in Malaya was around 70 per cent, privately run mills were producing only 60 per cent of rice from the paddy which they milled and, in some cases, considerably less. Part of the reasons for this was that the mills made extra money by selling the millings as animal feed. Millers would deliberately over-mill paddy to see that more broken rice and bran were produced.

> Apparently the millers make great profits by low extraction of rice … It is certain that when the return is below 70 per cent the rice is being over-milled … used to feed ducks, chickens

[52] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Minutes, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.8.
[53] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Minutes, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.13.

> and pigs. In any case milling well below 70 per cent results in some loss of rice, and far more important, the loss of vitamins of rice.[54]

This practice was to be avoided, with the paper recommending official legislation as a means of preventing over-milling. At a time in which the British colonial state had professed a genuine interest in the health and welfare of its citizens, it appeared 'strange' for the production of rice to be uncontrolled when the consumption of over-milled rice risked 'disease and even death'. In fact, the paper acknowledged that European colonialism was in part responsible for this.

> Many changes have occurred since the coming of the European to the East … The steam driven rice mills changed the dietary habits of the labouring classes until many of them acquired a preference for the dangerous highly milled rice over the wholesome hand pounded rice to which they had been accustomed.[55]

As such, the present issue of malnutrition was a long-term consequence of European colonialism in South-East Asia. In the post-war British spirit of colonial development and welfare, the logic followed that it was therefore the responsibility of the colonial power to rectify this issue and the conference resolved that there should be laws to prevent both 'the high milling of cereals to a degree dangerous to the health of the public' and controls over the use of rice millings.[56]

To enforce the under-milling of rice, the British added a requirement that they would only award official licenses to mills that could prove they produced a certain quantity of rice from the paddy they took in. The licensing scheme was itself an important aspect of the colonial government's efforts to manage the food shortage. Introduced by the BMA in December 1945, no mill was allowed to operate unless authorised by the colonial authorities. Licensed mills were allowed to purchase imported padi on the provision that they then sold the rice back to the government once it had been milled at a fixed price set by the state. In theory, this guaranteed both a steady stream of rice for Malayan citizens as well as income for millers. This requirement

[54] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Appendix G – Rice Milling, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.44.
[55] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Appendix G – Rice Milling, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.45.
[56] F 9420/3/61, Conference on Nutrition, Minutes, 13-16 May 1946, FO 371/53884, TNA, p.13.

remained in place throughout the food crisis, finally being dropped in 1949 once padi imports to Malaya had returned to their pre-war levels, restoring the rice market and government efforts to make minimal stocks stretch further were no longer deemed necessary.[57]

Distribution

Not only did the restored British colonial government in Malaya attempt to exert influence over the production and preparation of rice, but it also sought to control its distribution. In September 1945, the BMA issued a proclamation establishing a system of food control. The system allowed for the Food Controller, a post appointed by the Chief Civil Affairs Officer of the military administration, the power to designate any foodstuff as being controlled, rationed, or even both. The Controller was able to 'prohibit the purchase, sale or barter … control the import and export … and movement' of controlled foodstuffs. They were also responsible for regulating the ration system, setting ration scales, the price of rationed foodstuffs and managing the issue of ration cards to the population.[58] Akin to the system operating in Britain, the Malayan population was allocated an entitlement of specific foodstuffs which could be exchanged for coupons. This allocation, however, fluctuated greatly over the course of the post-war food shortage, never reaching the recommended twelve-ounce guideline given by the Young Working Party (YWP) as the minimum requirement to prevent disease and unrest (Figure 2).

One of ways the British colonial administration managed the distribution of food was through communal feeding programmes, including the establishment of so-called People's Restaurants and People's Kitchens. The People's Restaurants replicated the British Restaurant, a domestic wartime scheme designed to provide people who, through either the nature of their work or destruction of property, were unable to eat at home or claim rations with 'cheap and

[57] Kratoska, 'The Post-1945 Food Shortage in British Malaya', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19:1, 1988, p.45.
[58] *The Straits Chronicle*, 27 September 1945, p.2.

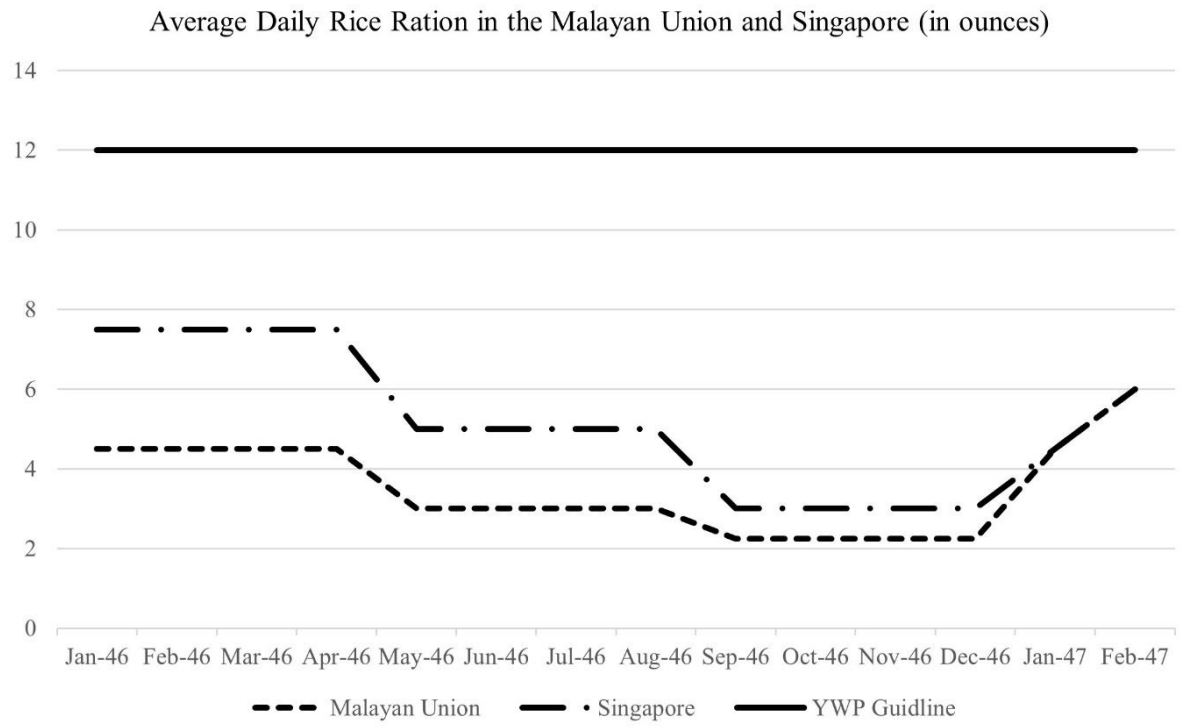

Figure 2 - Average Daily Rice Ration in the Malayan Union and Singapore, F 3187/2/61, Minutes of Tenth Liaison Officers Meeting, 18-19 February 1947, FO 371/63472, TNA.

nourishing meals.'[59] First opened in London in September 1940 before spreading throughout Britain, the British Restaurant enjoyed a 'modest' success, being responsible for feeding around half a million people a day at their peak in December 1943.[60] Organised by the Social Welfare Departments of the Governments of the Malayan Union and Singapore, the People's Restaurants were intended to help Malayan citizens acquire food cheaply, providing rounded meals at a price well below the rising cost of living in the colony. The first People's Restaurant opened in Singapore in late June 1946. A converted warehouse with capacity to feed 2,000 people, the opening was attended by high-ranking British officials including Governor Gimson and Patrick McKerron, the chief administrator of the colonial government. They were amongst the first to receive a 'nutritious and wholesome' meal which they described as 'excellent.'[61] The meals were designed in consultation with nutritional experts in the colonial government

[59] *How Britain was Fed in War Time: Food Control 1939-1945*, (London: HMSO, 1946), p.44.
[60] P. Atkins, 'Communal Feeding in War Time: British Restaurants, 1940-1947' in A. Drouard, R. Duffett, and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p.142.
[61] *The Straits Times*, 28 June 1946, p.3; *The Straits Times*, 30 June 1946, p.5.

with foodstuffs selected to provide around 700 calories, one-third of the recommended guideline for Malaya and Singapore. Typical fare was a portion of noodles or rice, served with a meat or fish dish (often curried) with a side of potatoes and other assorted vegetables. Priced at 35 cents, menus for the restaurants were printed each day in the local press. The People's Restaurant plan was expanded in August 1946, when the colonial state began to take applications from private commercial restaurants to join the scheme as an Approved Restaurant. Approved Restaurants would be assisted by the government in procuring and preparing food, in return submitting to all official controls and guaranteeing to sell meals at the same 35 cent price as the People's Restaurants.[62]

In terms of statistical achievements, the People's Restaurant scheme was impressive. By October 1946, there were six operating in Singapore alone. From June to mid-September, the Social Welfare Department estimated that a total of 307,000 meals had been distributed to Singaporeans through People's Restaurants.[63] Given the success in Singapore, the scheme was extended throughout the Malayan Union. Following advice from the Singapore Government, the first restaurant was opened in Kuala Lumpur in August 1946. By the end of the year 18 of them were in operation, the majority of which were in urban areas, including three in Kuala Lumpur and two in Penang. Throughout the Malayan Union, People's Restaurants were responsible for serving over two and a quarter million meals in the four-month period up to December 1946. The Malayan Union government's annual report proclaimed their success, commenting that 'it cannot be doubted that this venture in mass catering has materially assisted wide sections of the public at a time of acutely reduced rations and has exerted a stabilising influence upon the cooked food market.' [64]

[62] *The Straits Times*, 17 August 1946, p.1.
[63] *The Malaya Tribune*, 14 September 1946, p.3.
[64] *Annual Report on the Malayan Union for 1946 – April to December*, (Kuala Lumpur: HMSO, 1947), p.90.

In Singapore, the People's Restaurant scheme was complimented by a second communal feeding project, titled People's Kitchens. Extending the principals of the People's Restaurant in the provision of cheap and nutritious meals, People's Kitchens involved the mass cooking of set meals which were distributed to workplace canteens from a centralised location. Also operated under the auspices of the Singapore Government's Department of Social Welfare, People's Kitchens were a more devolved endeavour than People's Restaurants. While the Government would purchase the food and prepare it, firms who had placed orders for the meals would need to provide both the transport to collect them from the kitchens and have the facilities to serve the food. First opened in August 1946, People's Kitchens were supplying around 10,000 meals a day to industrial sites and offices as well as hospitals and schools by October.[65] Through the People's Kitchens, the Singapore authorities began to offer cheaper meals of 15 cents in response to the cut in the rice ration and the continued high cost of food. The cheaper meal tended to consist of meat or fish with a side of rice. Despite the lack of vegetables, the food provided was portioned such that it contained the same calorific value as the 35 cent meals on offer at People's Restaurants, ensuring that those who could not afford the higher cost did not remain undernourished.[66]

Not all in Singapore, however, agreed with the communal feeding schemes. Simultaneously railing against their apparent exclusivity, suggesting that the plans had effectively divided Singaporean society into those the state deemed worthy of assistance and those it did not, while drawing attention to the conflicting situation of the schemes being introduced at a time when the rice ration was cut, one letter published in *The Straits Times* read:

> How is it that Government can find rice to provide 50,000 meals a day when the rice ration for the public is cut[?] … If rice stocks are really low it would be better if neither the 'People's Restaurants' nor office canteens nor any of the commercial eating-shops or restaurants sell cooked rice. They should sell only mee or bee-hon [noodle based dishes]. It is a crime to allow 50,000 people to eat more rice and leave the remainder of the public

[65] SEAF (46) 131, Economic Bulletin No.3, October 1946, CAB 134/679, TNA, p.17.
[66] *Annual Report on Singapore for 1 April – 31 December 1946*, (London: HMSO, 1948), p.80.

> to suffer from shortage. Rice should be rationed as much as possible through the rice-cards, and stocks should not be used by any other means.[67]

In response to this complaint, a second letter entitled 'Boon to the Public', appeared in the same newspaper three days later.

> [The author] should realise that the People's Restaurants, People's Kitchens and Approved Restaurants are a move to combat the abnormal cost of living and also to alleviate the hardship of those who cannot afford to pay for meals in commercial eating-shops. I think the Government would have committed a crime had it not taken these steps but had instead left us to the mercy of those blood-sucking food-sellers who fleece us to the tune of $2.50 for a 35 cent feed.[68]

Indeed, this second quotation highlights the explicit economic interest the colonial state had in food supply. Communal feeding programmes were not only about ensuring the equitable distribution of food in Malaya and Singapore. They were also intended to break the hold of the black market over the rice trade.

Interestingly, the colonial government were keen to highlight that the communal feeding plans were not solely the altruistic act of a state looking to provide for its citizens in a time of crisis. They were run as a business. The Singapore Department of Social Welfare emphasised that 'the cardinal point' of these schemes was that they were *not* subsidised by the state.

> All wages, transport, supplies and fuel as well as the capital costs of premises and equipment are being paid for out of receipts … Although the 'People's' schemes are operated entirely by the Department of Social Welfare, without intrusion of food contractors, all purchases are made in the open market at ordinary prices. Even so, none of the schemes run at a loss.[69]

The colonial government were able to compel millers and merchants to sell direct to it, enforced with the threat of withdrawing operating licenses. This allowed them not only to undercut black market traders but also, by purchasing rice in bulk, to sell meals for the cheap prices stated above. In fact, once costs had been accounted for, the six Public Restaurants running in Singapore alone had turned a net profit of over M$40,000 (equivalent to £5,600 or nearly

[67] *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1946, p.4.
[68] *The Straits Times*, 26 August 1946, p.4.
[69] SEAF (46) 131, Economic Bulletin No.3, October 1946, CAB 134/679, TNA, p.17.

£200,000 today) in the first six months of operation until December 1946.[70] As such, the People's Restaurants were a microcosm of British food security policy in Malaya and Singapore, exploiting the colonies for profit under the guise of humanitarianism.

Conclusion

British food security policy in Malaya was guided by a desire to maintain order and hence British authority over the two colonies. To achieve this, the colonial state expanded its influence, involving itself more deeply in the lives of its citizens through direct intervention in the production, preparation, and distribution of food in Malaya and Singapore. This intervention was symptomatic of a patronising colonial mindset that insisted that Britain knew best, reinforced by lessons learned from the domestic wartime experience of campaigns to grow more food, rationing, and communal feeding plans. It also, however, reflected the developmental attitude which ran through the imperial rhetoric of the Labour Government. With a renewed focus on reinvigorating colonial economies for metropolitan profit, Malaya and its wealth of natural resources became the centre of British colonial attention in Asia. Food security was therefore a prerequisite of British imperial authority in the region.

[70] *The Straits Times*, 19 February 1947, p.6.

4: Thailand

Immediate British policy towards Siam was a direct result of that country's actions during the Second World War. As discussed in Chapter 1, Britain demanded that Siam provide 1.5 million tons of rice for free as reparations for Siam's involvement in the Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore. This demand was somewhat diluted, in part through American pressure but also from an awareness that it risked destabilising Siam. This chapter picks up the story of British efforts to acquire rice as cheaply as possible from Siam, further displaying how British policy was increasingly shaped by external influences.

British policy towards Siamese rice supply has previously been interpreted as an extension of imperial attitudes which viewed South-East Asian territories as being ripe for exploitation. Wilfred D. Reeve, a former adviser to the Siamese Ministry of Finance, criticised Britain's efforts to influence the Siamese rice trade in favour of Malaya and Singapore as 'an attempt to fly in the face of the ordinary laws of supply and demand.'[1] Reeve's argument was supported by historian Nicholas Tarling who stated that British policy was 'mistaken' because it encouraged rice merchants to hold on to their stock, artificially inflating the price and leading to political corruption. This ultimately contributed to the November 1947 coup and reinstatement of Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram, the wartime dictator, as Prime Minister.[2] Indeed, there is no doubting that British policy towards Siamese rice supplies was remarkably inconsistent, undergoing many modifications in the immediate post-war period. This chapter argues, however, that these changes were the result of both a successful diplomatic strategy from the Siamese Government and also from an increasing recognition, especially amongst British diplomats in South-East Asia, that the continued exploitation of Siam was detrimental to their efforts to feed Malaya and that, despite London instructing them to take a more

[1] W.D. Reeve, *Public Administration in Siam*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1951), p.70.
[2] Tarling, 'The British and Siamese Rice 1945-7', p.181.

interventionist approach, they had to deal with Siam, an independent sovereign nation, as an equal.

Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty Revisions

Early in 1946, it became apparent to British policy-makers that the rice clause in the Anglo-Siamese treaty agreed the previous December was not working. Even though the final terms agreed with Siam had significantly watered down the original requirement that Siam should provide 1.5 million tons of rice to Britain free of charge to a system in which Britain would pay for any immediate rice deliveries, supply Siam with consumer goods and gold, and extend the period of free delivery up to September 1947, these changes did not have the desired results. Just over one week after the signature of the treaty, Hugh Bird, the British Consul-General in Bangkok, telegrammed the Foreign Office with the news that Siamese finances could not afford a monthly loss of 60,000 tons of free rice which was required to meet their treaty obligations to Britain. Bird estimated that Britain could expect a monthly delivery of 25,000 tons of free rice at most and would have to pay for supplies to make up the deficit.[3]

In Washington, staff at the British Food Mission (BFM) were already planning further revisions to ensure Britain received the maximum amount of rice available.[4] Robert Brand, head of the BFM, informed the Ministry of Food that the agreed rice clause risked worsening an already precarious position in South-East Asia, and suggested fresh modifications to the peace treaty. The proposed Combined Thai Rice Commission (CTRC), a joint Anglo-American agency that was intended to assist the Siamese Government to increase rice production, should make an independent assessment of the available rice surplus in Siam. From this assessment, a target figure for Siamese rice exports for 1946 would be agreed, although it would be limited to 1.2 million tons. Unlike the previous clause, all the rice delivered by Siam throughout 1946

[3] F 397/3/61, Bird to Foreign Office, 8 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.
[4] The British Food Mission was a staff of British civil servants based in Washington which dealt with Anglo-American food policy. The head of the Mission acted as the British representative on the Combined Food Board.

would be paid for in full and only the shortfall on the revised export figure would be provided free of charge and subsequently delivered in 1947.[5] Back in London, however, Brand's plan drew criticism from the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department.

> In considering these proposals it must be borne in mind that there is no evidence that the virtual abandonment of our demand for free rice, which in practice they would involve, would have the effect of producing any more rice than our local advisers expect to obtain by using the authority they already have to buy any rice in excess of what Siam's economy can stand in the way of free rice, i.e. about 20-25,000 tons a month.[6]

The Treasury also opposed Brand's suggested revisions. They did not want to commit Britain prematurely to a scheme where they would have to pay Siam for any amount of rice received in excess of 20,000 tons a month for a twelve-month period, especially when future Siamese rice production remained so uncertain.[7] The Foreign Office also recognised that there were broader political and diplomatic implications. By making further amendments to an already 'lenient' peace treaty, they argued that these concessions would make it appear that Britain was essentially bribing Siam into honouring its treaty obligations, an act which held the potential to create 'a most unfortunate precedent' for British policy in South-East Asia.[8] It could jeopardise Britain's declared regional objectives, threatening the planned restoration of British rule in Malaya and possibly encouraging nationalist movements to make stronger demands for independence from European colonial control, which would further destabilise the area.

Despite concern in Whitehall, British officials in South-East Asia were more receptive. Esler Dening, the Foreign Office's most senior representative in SEAC, stated that these new proposals seemed 'the most likely to succeed in procuring rice in 1946 than any other proposal yet put forward.'[9] Dening warned his superiors, however, that acceptance of this scheme could damage British prestige. Given the concurrent tripartite negotiations between Britain, the United States and Siam, Dening believed that accepting these revisions would lessen British

[5] F 510/3/61, Brand to Sanderson, 5 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.
[6] F 536/3/61, Foreign Office Far Eastern Department Minute, 8 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, pp.1-2.
[7] F 536/3/61, Foreign Office Far Eastern Department Minute, 8 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.2.
[8] F 536/3/61, Foreign Office Far Eastern Department Minute, 8 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.2.
[9] F 869/3/61, Dening to Foreign Office, 16 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.

influence over Siam and lead the Siamese to align themselves ever closer with the United States. The Americans would claim that British revisions were 'the result of pressure by them … further proof of their friendly and disinterested care for Siamese welfare.'[10]

At the end of January 1946, Minister of Food Sir Ben Smith brought the true scale of the rice shortage facing South-East Asia to the Cabinet's attention. Placing the regional situation into the wider context of an expected global cereal shortage of 700,000 tons of rice, Smith informed his Cabinet colleagues that South-East Asia would most likely be facing a deficit of 179,000 tons of available rice supplies for the first quarter of the year.[11] Despite the peace treaty terms agreed with Siam, it was 'proving impossible' to obtain Siamese rice at the rate necessary to prevent famine in Malaya.[12] Smith, as he had done in 1945, blamed the extent of British demands. Relaying Brand's alterations to the Cabinet, Smith stated that they did not amount to Britain abandoning the free rice clause, a course derided by Ernest Bevin as sign of weakness one month previously. Rather, Britain's claim to free rice from Siam was 'merely' being postponed until 1947.[13] It was on those terms that both Bevin and Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer, offered their approval of these further revisions of the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty to the Cabinet.[14]

Bevin was forced into accepting the new revisions due to the developing situation in South-East Asia. Just days before the Cabinet meeting, Bird telegrammed London with a message that the rice situation in Siam was 'desperate.'[15] Only 14,000 tons was expected to be available for export to British territories during February, a fact which Bird attributed to the treaty arrangements. In his opinion, the treaty had inadvertently permitted 'a lack of

[10] F 869/3/61, Dening to Foreign Office, 16 January 1946, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.2
[11] CP (46) 28, 29 January 1946, CAB 129/6/28, TNA, p.1.
[12] CP (46) 28, 29 January 1946, CAB 129/6/28, TNA, p.2.
[13] CM (46) 10, 31 January 1946, CAB 128/5/10, TNA, p.74.
[14] CM (46) 10, 31 January 1946, CAB 128/5/10, TNA, p.74
[15] F 1622/3/61, Bird to Foreign Office, 27 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, p.1.

wholehearted effort' from the Siamese Government to acquire rice for free export to Britain.[16] With these facts in mind, the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department prepared a brief for Bevin on the MoF proposals, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the treaty revisions. On the one hand, making these further concessions to the Siamese could induce a change in their attitudes, the brief stated, encouraging them to provide Britain with the necessary rice. It also held the potential to deepen Anglo-American co-operation in Siam, especially over the pressing issues of setting a fixed price for rice and organising the proposed combined commission.[17] On the other hand, the plan amounted to 'a complete abandonment' of the free rice clause. Giving in at the first sign of difficulty, before the terms established under the present treaty had been seriously tested, would be interpreted as 'a considerable victory' for the Siamese Government, a victory 'for which the Americans will no doubt claim the credit.'[18] Accepting these revisions risked establishing an awkward precedent in future Anglo-Siamese relations.

> It is bad policy to offer material inducements to the Siamese Government merely to honour their bond. If we adopt such a policy the Siamese will no doubt feel that they can safely be dilatory and obstructive in other matters, and we may next have difficulties with them over the price of rice.[19]

Despite these reservations, however, the Foreign Office concluded that final judgement had to be based on the merits of the argument put to the Cabinet by the MoF in view of the need to acquire enough rice to avert famine in Malaya.[20]

Following the Cabinet discussion, an inter-departmental meeting was held at the Foreign Office to coordinate the government's approach. John Sterndale Bennett, head of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department, believed that Britain's claim for 1.5 million tons of free rice from Siam would remain intact, only being postponed until 1947. Sir Harold Sanderson, Director of Rice at the MoF, informed Sterndale Bennett that this was not the case as the

[16] F 1622/3/61, Bird to Foreign Office, 27 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, p.1.
[17] F 1929/3/61, Foreign Office Brief, 30 January 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.2.
[18] F 1929/3/61, Foreign Office Brief, 30 January 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.2.
[19] F 1929/3/61, Foreign Office Brief, 30 January 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.2.
[20] F 1929/3/61, Foreign Office Brief, 30 January 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.2.

proposals put to Cabinet had no such provision. In fact, the MoF wanted to abandon the rice clause altogether, with only the shortfall from the target export figure being provided for free. Referring to the MoF's intention to use the combined rice commission to set this target figure, Sterndale Bennett commented that the Tripartite Agreement was still under negotiation and hence there would be no assessment of Siamese rice production until it had been successfully concluded.[21] , it was agreed that Britain itself should set a preliminary figure in case either the tripartite negotiations or subsequent assessment process took longer than expected. The amount settled on was 1.25 million tons of rice, 'the maximum that would be possible' because of the limitations on shipping and internal transportation in Siam.[22]

The following day, Smith asked Bevin if he would still approve the plan now he understood that Britain would only be receiving the short-fall for free.[23] Sterndale Bennett instructed the Foreign Secretary to accept, commenting that the political concerns of the Foreign Office regarding damage to British prestige in and a strengthening of American influence over Siam were far 'outweighed by the immediate necessities of the serious world food situation.'[24] Bevin heeded his department's advice, offering his full acceptance of the plans, and withdrawing his reservation expressed to the Cabinet that he would only agree on the condition that the free rice clause was postponed until 1947 rather than dropped altogether.[25]

The Treasury also weakened their stance over Siamese rice, albeit not to the same extent as Bevin and the Foreign Office. The Cabinet met in the morning of 11 February with the Treasury agreeing to increase the MoF's import budget by £10 million for the first six months of 1946.[26] Dalton wrote to Bevin and Smith that afternoon, stating that this extra funding was

[21] F 2183/3/61, Minutes of Meeting on Siamese Rice held at the Foreign Office, 5 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.1.
[22] F 2183/3/61, Minutes of Meeting on Siamese Rice held at the Foreign Office, 5 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.2.
[23] F 2229/3/61, Smith to Bevin, 6 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.3.
[24] F 2229/3/61, Minute by Sterndale Bennett, 7 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA.
[25] F 2229/3/61, Bevin to Smith, 11 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.1.
[26] CM (46) 16, 11 February 1946, TNA, CAB 128/5/14, p.106.

the furthest the Treasury could stretch to. Dalton had no objection to paying for rice deliveries from Siam for the first three months of 1946 but after this period, a reassessment would need to be made on the quantity of rice that would be delivered both at cost and free of charge, he said. He asked the MoF to reconsider totally abandoning the free rice clause, estimating that the cost of the rice required for British territories in South-East Asia was beyond Britain's finances, and that the policy would have domestic repercussions due to the continuation of rationing. As he put it:

> You know what £20 million means to us in these days. I cannot believe that the long-suffering people of this country would be content to accept a further cut in their rations because we have abandoned a claim to free rice to which we are entitled …[27]

The Foreign Office responded to Dalton's plea of poverty. Sterndale Bennett commented that, while he understood the Chancellor's reluctance to give up Britain's claim on free rice, this had to weighed against the possible financial and political costs of failing to prevent famine. Britain's need 'to avoid famine and the blame for it' in South-East Asia had to take precedence. Failure to achieve these objectives risked the possibility of far greater expenditure in South-East Asia than the MoF revisions entailed for it risked undermining British authority and losing access to Malaya's profitable natural resources which were needed to help Britain pay off its wartime debts. Sir Orme Sargent, the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office, agreed with the Treasury line. With rice being bought for distribution in British territories in South-East Asia, Sargent believed that it was 'particularly hard' to put the cost onto the British taxpayer and asked if the Treasury intended to eventually recoup the costs from the colonial governments concerned.[28] Bevin stated that this was how he had interpreted the MoF proposals to work, namely 'that the British taxpayer does not pay a penny' for any of the rice purchased under the revised scheme.[29] Given the pressing need to prevent famine in Malaya, Bevin

[27] F 2348/3/61, Dalton to Smith, 11 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.1.
[28] F 2348/3/61, Minute by Sir Orme Sargent, 15 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA.
[29] F 2348/3/61, Minute by Bevin, n.d., FO 371/53840, TNA.

concluded that Britain would have to abandon the claim to free rice to encourage export and production in Siam.

The matter returned to Cabinet again that following week. Bevin informed his colleagues that he now supported abandoning Britain's claim to free rice from Siam.[30] The Treasury's concern over who would be in fact be paying, Britain or the colonial governments which received the rice, was also raised. The Cabinet agreed that Britain should not have to pay for the rice and that the colonies themselves would bear the cost out of their respective sterling balances which they had accumulated during the war. George Hall, Secretary of State for the Colonies, asked whether Malaya would be expected to pay for Siamese rice. Because of the Japanese occupation, Malaya did not possess as large a sterling balance as some of Britain's other colonies and so did not have the funds to pay for Siamese rice. Nevertheless Attlee and Bevin informed Hall that the Malayan Government would be charged. This was caveated, however, with the comment that if Malaya was unable to pay, the issue would be considered as part of Britain's wider post-war rehabilitation programme for the colony.[31] With the Foreign Office and Treasury now satisfied with the MoF proposals, the Cabinet agreed that Britain should not press ahead with its claim to free rice from Siam.[32]

Tripartite Negotiations

Against the backdrop of further treaty revisions, the British resumed negotiations with the American and Siamese governments over the tripartite agreement first suggested by the State Department in September 1945. Central to this envisioned three-power agreement was the creation of the Combined Thai Rice Commission (CTRC). The American government had a clear definition of how it thought the CTRC should operate. It was to be solely 'an administrative agency for stimulating rice production and controlling the export of rice' and

[30] CM (46) 16, 18 February 1946, CAB 128/5/16, TNA, p.1.
[31] CM (46) 16, 18 February 1946, CAB 128/5/16, TNA, p.1
[32] CM (46) 16, 18 February 1946, CAB 128/5/16, TNA, p.1

would hold no authority to purchase rice on behalf of Britain or the United States.[33] In January 1946, Sanderson held talks in Washington with various American officials regarding the functions of the CTRC. These talks were successful in producing the first drafts of the Tripartite Agreement and its associated Memorandum of Understanding. The Tripartite Agreement set out the terms of Anglo-American assistance for improving production and export rates of rice, rubber, and tin from Siam, declaring the desire of the British and American governments 'to aid and co-operate' with Siam to achieve these objectives.[34] Article Two of the agreement was directed specifically towards rice and the work of the CTRC. The commission was to co-operate with the Siamese Government to promote the maximum economic production of rice' and arrange the export of rice deemed surplus to Siam's internal needs. It would act as a channel for the Siamese to request aid which could improve its rice export rate, such as extra transportation and consumer goods, to the British and American governments.[35] The CTRC would not, however, help the British in their claims for free rice. Any rice which was exported under its auspices would be paid for, at a price agreed between the commission and the Siamese government[36] The accompanying Memorandum of Understanding offered further clarification of the CTRC's position. Siam had the primary responsibility for improving the production and export of rice. The commission was merely to 'advise and assist' Siam to fulfil this obligation. At no point should it make financial claims to any amount of rice.[37]

The draft agreements were approved by the State Department just a few days later, with a formal acceptance by both the British and American governments expected before the beginning of February 1946. After this, full negotiations could begin with Siam. Rifts between Britain and the United States were, however, starting to develop. While the two powers agreed

[33] Document 990, Aide-Mémoire by the State Department to the British Embassy, 9 October 1945, *FRUS 1945 Vol.VI.*
[34] F 1237/3/61, Draft Tripartite Agreement, 17 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, p.1.
[35] F 1237/3/61, Draft Tripartite Agreement, 17 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, p.2.
[36] F 1237/3/61, Draft Tripartite Agreement, 17 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, p.4.
[37] F 1237/3/61, Draft Memorandum of Understanding, 17 January 1946, FO 371/53839, TNA, pp.1-3.

that the price of Siamese rice needed to be set at a high enough level to encourage Siamese farmers to sell and further expand their production, the Americans were unwilling to accept the British suggestion that this price should not exceed £15 per ton. Despite acknowledging the British limit as being nearly double the market value of Siamese rice, the State Department would not agree to a limit until American officials in Siam had completed a quality assessment of the rice being provided for export.[38] The State Department held that the current market value was 'too low to stimulate production or eliminate hoarding' of rice by Siamese producers. Improving the efficiency of Siamese rice export could only be achieved 'through obtaining voluntary willing cooperation' of the Siamese Government and rice growers, they suggested. The Americans felt that the best way of doing this would be through the offering of 'reasonably generous prices', which were even more important given that the Siamese government were obligated to provide Britain with free rice.[39]

Despite the progress made with the United States, there were still elements in Whitehall resistant to the increasingly preferential treatment Britain appeared to be offering the Siamese. The Colonial Office thought the terms of the draft Tripartite Agreement were too lenient, for Siam would only have to export rice surplus to its own needs and would possibly be left in a better position in terms of food supply than British territories dependent on Siamese rice. The Colonial Office sought an assurance that the CTRC be made responsible for assessing Siam's internal needs and fixing the rate of rice consumption in the country so there would be 'no question of leaving Siam with a rate of consumption far and away above the level that will be attainable' in British colonial territory across South-East Asia.[40] The Foreign Office criticised the 'quite vain' Colonial Office suggestion. It was politically impossible to set rations in an independent and sovereign state such as Siam, and the Colonial Office were reminded of this

[38] Document 741, Acheson to Yost, 22 January 1946, *FRUS 1946 Vol. VIII.*
[39] Document 741, Acheson to Yost, 22 January 1946, *FRUS 1946 Vol. VIII.*
[40] F 2053/3/61, TW Davies to Sterndale Bennett, c. February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA, p.1.

fact with the comment that 'even the Nazis in highly organised European countries were not able to prevent food producers from being much better fed than the food importers.'[41]

Following the Cabinet decision to abandon Britain's claim to free rice from Siam, another interdepartmental meeting was held to discuss the effects of this abandonment on the Tripartite Agreement. While Sanderson believed that the Americans would generally approve of Britain giving up its claim to free rice, the price agreed between Britain and Siam might prove problematic. The proposed price of £15 per ton of rice would be seen as 'a bargain' agreed exclusively between Britain and Siam, and therefore resented by other states and colonies. Sanderson argued that this price would be of mutual benefit to all claimants on Siamese rice as designated by the Combined Food Board (CFB), extending to the American interests of the Philippines and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).[42] There was the danger that the Siamese, possibly with the encouragement of the Americans, would deliberately inflate the price of their rice to a level comparable with the market value. To remove this possibility, the MoF and Foreign Office agreed that the price should be fixed with the Siamese Government prior to the signing of the Tripartite Agreement, leaving no opportunity for the CTRC to negotiate a price on Britain's behalf.[43] Before conclusive judgement could be made on formally fixing a price for rice with the Siamese without American involvement, the British received approval from the State Department for their proposed amendment to set a specified target figure of 1.2 million tons of rice for export from Siam for the twelve-month period following the Agreement's successful conclusion. Washington, like London, believed that this new policy, along with Britain's abandonment of the free rice claim, would 'greatly aid in the important objective of maximizing export from and production of rice in Siam.'[44] The Americans did suggest a slight modification to Britain's proposals, however.

[41] F 2053/3/61, Minute by E H St. George Moss, 8 February 1946, FO 371/53840, TNA.
[42] F 2830/3/61, Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting, 19 February 1946, FO 371/53841, TNA, p.1.
[43] F 2830/3/61, Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting, 19 February 1946, FO 371/53841, TNA, p.1.
[44] Document 744, Department of State to the British Embassy, 7 March 1946, *FRUS 1946 Vol. VIII.*

While the twelve-month export figure would remain at 1.2 million tons, the State Department requested that the monthly rate of export be set at the discretion of the Siamese Government in co-operation with the CTRC to ensure Siam remained suitably fed itself.

With that matter appearing to have been resolved, the British returned to the issue of price. With Whitehall settling on the figure of £15 per ton, Bird telegrammed London doubting the wisdom of setting a fixed price to cover the twelve-month period in which Siam would export 1.2 million tons of rice. There was no guarantee that the current exchange rate (four pence to the tical) would persist throughout the period, rendering any pre-determined sterling price for Siamese rice 'non-sensical'.[45] Officials in the Foreign Office itself appeared to have been questioning this policy too. Observing that fixing a price was incompatible with the drafted Tripartite Agreement in its present form, Sterndale Bennett confessed to 'considerable doubt' that setting a price was either 'tenable or wise.' If the final price agreed between Siam and Britain was better than what the Siamese could expect to obtain selling its rice on the world market, Sterndale Bennett feared that Siam would seek to only sell its rice to the British at the expense of other possible buyers. While acknowledging that they would not be purchasing Siamese rice 'in our interest alone', with the 1.2 million tons set to be exported according to CFB allocations, the British would effectively be setting the price that other nations would have to pay. This risked further disagreement with the United States, leading Sterndale Bennett to suggest that Britain should, in fact, agree to the CTRC setting the price.[46] Richard Allen, of the Far Eastern Department, echoed Sterndale Bennett's fears regarding the American reaction. The United States government, Allen commented, might possibly take the view that accepting a price for rice which had been set exclusively between Britain and Siam was as 'repugnant' to them as accepting free rice would have been.[47] Despite the possible negative response from the

[45] F 4007/3/61, Bird to Foreign Office, 18 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA, p.1.
[46] F 4007/3/61, Minute by Sterndale Bennett, 18 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA.
[47] F 4007/3/61, Minute by Richard Allen, 18 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA.

Americans, Allen argued that setting a price held three advantages. Firstly, Britain would know the exact monetary cost of the concession it had made to Siam. Secondly, allowing the CTRC to set the price would incur delays. After all, the CTRC had not yet been established and it was possible that it might take time, time which Malaya and Singapore did not have, to agree a price with the Siamese Government. Thirdly, if the price was fixed between Britain and Siam, it would avoid the situation in which the United States and Siamese governments could put forward a price that was too expensive for Britain. Refusal to pay this higher price would mean that Britain would 'inevitably be blamed for being obstructive' by the Americans.[48]

With these advantages in mind, the Foreign Office instructed Bird to communicate the proposed price of £15 per ton to the Siamese Government.[49] The following day, the British Embassy in Washington was sent a note to hand to the State Department defending Britain's choice to agree a price with the Siamese independent of the Americans. Highlighting the 'very substantial concession' that Britain had already made by abandoning the free rice clause in the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty, the British argued that they had decided on fixing a price to remove any further 'hindrance to procurement and in order to ensure satisfactory flow of supplies'. Given the precarious nature of the South-East Asian food situation, speed of procurement was 'essential'. The British believed that by setting a high price (£15 per ton was nearly 85 per cent over the current £8.10 market value of rice) from the outset, Siamese rice producers would be more likely to sell now rather than hold their product back out of the prospect of future prices being even higher.[50] The British asserted that fixing a price would secure future access to Siamese rice supplies on behalf of the CFB. It had 'little relevance' to their own objective of encouraging Siam to export its accumulated surplus to supply British territories in South-East Asia. It was stressed to the Americans that any rice acquired under

[48] F 4007/3/61, Minute by Richard Allen, 18 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA.
[49] F 4007/3/61, Foreign Office to Bird, 20 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA, p.1.
[50] F 4007/3/61, Foreign Office to Washington, 21 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA, p.1

British proposals would be distributed in accordance with CFB allocations. The Foreign Office hoped that, considering Britain's expressed commitment to the CFB and abandonment of the free rice clause, it was 'reasonable' to expect the Americans to agree to the proposals. Only if Siam failed to export 1.2 million tons at £15 per ton in the twelve-month period following the agreement coming in to force would it be obliged to provide the shortfall free of charge. It was noted that the terms of the Tripartite Agreement, unlike the Anglo-Siamese treaty, were the result of negotiation with the Siamese Government and were not to be 'merely presented to them for signature'.[51] A clear display of American support for the British proposals would make the Siamese more likely to agree to them.

Events in Siam, however, threatened to derail the progress that had been made. In late March 1946, the recently elected Prime Minister Khuang Aphaiwong lost a vote of no confidence in the Siamese parliament resulting in his resignation and replacement by Pridi Banomyong, the former Prince Regent and influential figure in the wartime 'Free Thai' anti-Japanese resistance movement. Despite suspicion in London, Pridi had proved sincere in his attempts to build closer relations with Britain and the United States during the war. Pridi had refused to recognise the military dictatorship's declaration of war on the Allies in 1942. He also conducted his own private diplomacy with the two governments through the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) teams which were deployed to Siam.[52] Indeed, the British appeared willing to work with Pridi's government, with the Foreign Office having previously complimented his administrative ability.[53] A new government in Bangkok, headed by someone who appeared to desire close relations with Britain and the United States, increased the prospect of the British proposals being accepted.

[51] F 4007/3/61, Foreign Office to Washington, 21 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA, pp.1-2.
[52] Williams, 'Siam: A Bone of Contention', pp.192-194.
[53] Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, p.619.

Britain's proposed amendments to the Tripartite Agreement had yet to be put to the Khuang administration before it fell and this left open the possibility for further changes. Geoffrey Thompson, the newly appointed British Ambassador to Siam, suspected that the Pridi government might revalue the tical in response to high inflation. Until the new Siamese government's plan was clear, Thompson suggested that London delayed offering them £15 per ton of rice.[54] The Foreign Office responded a few days that this was impractical. This fixed price was central to Britain's amended rice offer to Siam. In British eyes, the value of the tical and the price of rice were closely interlinked. If the Siamese government revalued their currency to the point at which the sterling to tical exchange rate meant that Britain would pay more than £15 per ton, this might impact the economies of the other main rice exporters in South-East Asia and undermine British efforts to restore political stability to the region. The Foreign Office were clear that no matter what valuation the Pridi government placed on the tical, the British would not value Siamese rice at more than £15 per ton.[55] That same day, Thompson was summoned to the Siamese Foreign Ministry to meet with the new Foreign Minister, Direk Jayanama. He used this meeting as an opportunity to present Siam with the proposed amendments to price fixing in the Tripartite Agreement. Thompson told Direk that the British offer to agree a price with Siam represented 'a fresh start' which would be 'very advantageous to the Siamese economy.'[56] At this stage, however, the actual £15 limit which Britain was prepared to pay for rice was kept secret from the Siamese government. The exact wording of the British proposal left room for future negotiation over price.[57] The following day, Thompson was summoned again to meet Direk. Thompson used this second meeting to make it clear that while London was prepared to negotiate over price, Britain would not pay more than £15 per ton. Despite this, the Siamese government accepted this amendment and Direk informed

[54] F 4472/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 23 March 1946, FO 371/53848, TNA, p.1.
[55] F 4472/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53848, TNA, p.1.
[56] F 4664/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53489, TNA, p.1.
[57] F 4663/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53849, TNA, p.1.

Thompson of their readiness to sign the Tripartite Agreement, which was duly telegrammed back to London.[58]

With the Siamese on board, all that was left to do was convince the Americans. As Thompson was meeting Direk in Bangkok, telegrams were being exchanged between the British and American governments. On 27 March 1946, Lord Halifax informed London that Washington agreed on the necessity of fixing a price for rice. At this stage, prior to Thompson's second meeting with Direk, the Americans were prepared to keep the Siamese out of price negotiation. Though they would prefer it if the Siamese government were involved, the State Department had no issue discussing the matter only with the British.[59] The Americans felt they could temper any sign of British excess, an Anglo-American negotiated price ultimately being better than one that had been set solely by Britain and, in their eyes, subsequently forced upon Siam.

John Allison, Consul to the American Embassy in London, met with Sterndale Bennett that same day. Here, Sterndale Bennett informed Allison that Britain could not leave the issue of price 'entirely in the air' as a fixed price was 'an essential condition' of Britain's proposal. Allison's response was positive, relaying the American intention to agree a price with Britain. Allison suggested that this negotiation should not be left to the State Department and Foreign Office in Washington and London, but rather that it should be conducted at the discretion of the British and American diplomats based out in Bangkok who, with their knowledge of local conditions, Allison felt, 'could very quickly reach agreement.'[60] The British would be represented by Thompson, and Somerset Butler, a British national who had lived in Siam and had experience of the rice industry there. The American representatives were Charles Yost, the Charge d'Affaires in Bangkok and his adviser, Walter Kahn. Despite Allison's hope that a price

[58] F 4783/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53850, TNA, p.1.
[59] F 4666/3/61, Halifax to Sanderson, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53489, TNA, p.1.
[60] F 4750/3/61, Record of Conversation between John Allison and Sterndale Bennett, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53850, TNA, p.1.

could be agreed by representatives on the ground in Siam, Washington still held reservations about British methods. Writing to Sterndale Bennett on 28 March, Allison informed the British that the State Department were opposed to presenting an agreed price to Siam on the understanding that this would be the upper limit which either Britain or the United States were prepared to pay for rice. The Americans feared that the finally agreed price might, in fact, be lower than the presented limit. In this event, it was likely that Siamese rice producers, armed with the knowledge that Britain and the United States could pay more, might deliberately withhold their crop to artificially increase demand to drive up the price closer to the higher limit. The State Department also argued that the price of rice should be fixed in Siam's currency. Once this price was agreed between Britain and the United States, sterling and dollar prices for Siamese rice would be set based on the exchange rate. [61] This proposal was unacceptable to the British. When Sanderson was informed of the American intention to fix the price of rice in ticals, he wrote to Allen at the Foreign Office that he thought this decision was 'quite impracticable' for it would leave Britain exposed to a fluctuating exchange rate.[62]

Despite differences on detail between Washington and London, British and American representatives in Bangkok appeared to be working in harmony. Kahn had been conducting his own valuation of Siamese rice and had come to an 'almost identical result' as the British.[63] Still faced with the possibility that the Siamese Government may revalue its currency, the British and the Americans settled on an offer of £14.5s per ton. This would allow the Siamese space to revalue the tical up to six pence (forty ticals to the pound) which would keep the value of rice within the £15 limit that Britain had first suggested. When Thompson and Kahn met with Pridi on 28 March, the Siamese Prime Minister told the pair that he was 'delighted' with the Anglo-American offer and that his government would accept this price.[64] Pridi asked Thompson about

[61] F 4849/3/61, Allison to Sterndale Bennett, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53850, TNA, p.1.
[62] F 4962/3/61, Sanderson to Allen, 29 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.
[63] F 4850/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1
[64] F 4881/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.

the progress made in London with regard to the 200,000 ounces of gold that Britain had promised to sell Siam in December 1945 to help stabilise its economy. He expressed his hope that this transaction would take place as soon as possible for he had reason to believe that merchants in Siam were 'up to their necks' in rice and would be more likely to sell to the government if promised gold in return. Thompson himself supported Pridi's stance. He did not tell the Siamese Prime Minister that the Treasury, with Britain now committed to pay Siam for rice, were contemplating withdrawing the offer of gold. Instead, he told the Foreign Office that he thought it necessary that the deal should still go ahead, for gold was still the 'most valuable inducement' to procure rice from the growers.[65] Thompson received London's response to Pridi's questioning two days later.

> We note the opinion that gold would be valuable in Siam as an inducement commodity. This is more or less true almost everywhere and especially in all tropical or primitive food producing countries, but we certainly do not, nor could we afford to, make gold available for the purpose … Now that circumstances have altered and Siam is to be paid for her rice, there ceases to be any justification for exceptional treatment in her case as regards the provision of gold.[66]

The British could not justify parting with 200,000 ounces of gold having already waived their claim on receiving 1.5 million tons of rice free of charge, which the Treasury had costed at £20 million. The Siamese still held gold reserves worth £11 million, which the Foreign Office suggested to Thompson they should be drawing on first to induce farmers to sell their rice. Doubting whether Siam had even formally accepted the gold offer in the first place, London stressed that the circumstances were now entirely different from when the gold had first been offered as an inducement in December 1945. Thompson must make Pridi aware that the present British offer to pay £14.5s per ton for 1,200,000 tons of rice 'supersedes any arrangements previously contemplated' in connection to the abandoned free rice clause.[67] In spite of the gold

[65] F 4850/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.
[66] F 4850/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 30 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1. – This telegram was initially despatched by accident. Following consultation with the SEAF committee on 2 April 1946, Thompson was permitted to communicate its contents to the Siamese government.
[67] F 4850/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 30 March 1946, FO 371/53851, TNA, p.1.

issue being raised by the Siamese, the Foreign Office concluded that this phase of tripartite negotiations had been a success. A deal which suited all parties had been reached. The gap between British and American opinion had significantly narrowed. More importantly, and although having to pay, Britain had secured access to the much-needed rice required to feed Malaya and Singapore.

Revising the Tripartite Agreement

The importance of Siamese rice sources to Britain's wider regional famine relief programme was not lost on Lord Killearn. Following the preliminary March Food Conference in Singapore, Killearn informed the Foreign Office that the participation of Siam, alongside French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies was 'obviously desirable' if British efforts to resolve the food crisis facing South-East Asia were to be successful. Ahead of the April Conference, Killearn drafted a resolution to be considered by representatives from the British colonial territories which recommended he make a formal approach to the Siamese Government 'with a view to co-operation in the common effort for common good.'[68] This proposal received a negative reaction in London, appearing to the Foreign Office to 'amount merely to asking the Siamese to do what they are in fact doing already.'[69] In Bangkok, however, Thompson was more supportive. In discussing Killearn's resolution with Butler and Kahn, the three agreed that making it clear that Britain was seeking Siam's co-operation, as equal parties, over the rice shortage would have psychological value in the country. Thompson recommended that Killearn should make a personal representation to the Siamese Government to ask for their co-operation.[70] The appearance of a high-ranking official in Bangkok would demonstrate the sincerity of Britain's request and would possibly lead to a more positive outcome than had it

[68] F 5255/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 4 April 1946, FO 371/53853, TNA, p.1.
[69] F 5255/3/61, Minute by Moss, 6 April 1946, FO 371/53853, TNA.
[70] F 5458/3/61, Thompson to Killearn, 6 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1.

been made solely by an exchange of notes. Thompson urged that the wording of the resolution be changed to reflect this more personal approach, an action supported by the Foreign Office.[71]

Throughout the final stages of putting the revised deal to the Siamese Government, Thompson was becoming increasingly exasperated with what he felt was heavy-handed instructions from London. He was instructed to inform the Siamese Prime Minister that, given the concessions Britain had already made, they were expecting Siam to accept the revised deal. If not, London threatened that they would be forced to revert to the original peace treaty clause, which stated that Siam would provide 1.5 million tons to the British for free.[72] Thompson told the Foreign Office that he would not deliver 'this icy message' to Pridi, arguing that 'rice will not be obtained by uttering empty threats … or delivering stormy lectures to Siamese politicians.' Thompson remained convinced that the best method of procuring rice from Siam was to offer a fair price to cultivators and supplies of consumer goods for merchants, and that Britain must 'secure the co-operation of the Siamese Government in a plan that the Siamese and the Americans regard as fair'.[73] Thompson's refusal was considered by the SEAF Committee in London the following day. Here it was agreed that the ambassador's attitude was 'unreasonable'. All the evidence gathered so far suggested that the Siamese would be capable of providing Britain with the 1.2 million tons of rice stipulated in the revised agreement. Some members of the Committee suggested, however, that Thompson was the best placed person to judge the rice situation in Siam, and Whitehall should heed the advice of British personnel on the ground in that country.[74]

Following the meeting, the Foreign Office passed details of the SEAF discussion on to Thompson. It was stressed that Thompson's proposals would effectively undermine London's declared policy. Thompson had suggested that the Siamese Government be allowed to conduct

[71] F 5458/3/61, Minutes by Moss and Anderson, 10 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA.
[72] Tarling, 'The British and Siamese Rice 1945-7', p.166.
[73] F 5459/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 9 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1.
[74] SEAF (46) 8th Meeting, 10 April 1946, CAB 134/677, TNA, p.6.

its own survey of rice production, rendering the 1.2 million tons agreed in the revised Tripartite Agreement only a target rather than a definite amount to be received. The Foreign Office criticised this approach, implying that it would amount to Britain surrendering, without question, its claims on a fixed delivery of rice in exchange for an unspecified amount based on a survey which the Siamese themselves had conducted. Instead, Thompson was to fix a monthly export figure with Siamese Government and ensure that they stuck to it.[75] London did offer Thompson some justification for their criticisms, coloured by a suspicion of Siamese intentions. The British remained certain that Siam was in possession of a surplus of rice which, when combined with future yields, would mean they were capable of exporting 1.2 million tons. The British thought that the Siamese would deliberately suggest their total rice exports for 1946 would be lower than 1.2 million tons to avoid any penalties and lessen their responsibility for encouraging further production. London suspected that the Siamese would then produce additional rice, the existence of which had been deliberately obscured from the British. This excess quantity would not be subject to the terms of the Tripartite Agreement and could be sold by Siam on the world market, for a greater value than the price per ton agreed with Britain. Most importantly, however, the revised Tripartite Agreement already had the support of the United States.[76] Thompson's battle with his superiors back in London was symptomatic of wider trends in British policy in South-East Asia. Whitehall was willing to instruct its diplomats to make direct interventions, in this case into the domestic affairs of an independent state, to ensure that British interests were not prejudiced.

Like Thompson, Killearn also recognised the importance of maintaining good relations with Siam. When the news of the revised deal was eventually announced to the public, Killearn offered London some advice for publicity. As he put it, the

> Decision to make payment for rice should not be attributed to the failure of Siam to provide free rice as agreed but should be presented as a natural grant in line with our policy helping

[75] F 5459/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 15 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1.
[76] F 5459/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 15 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, pp.1-2.

> to restore [the] economic balance of South-East Asia to normal as soon as possible. Restoration of normal trade of which this is an example will help put Siam back on her feet again which will in turn help South-East Asia more generally in its return to prosperity.[77]

Killearn understood that the revisions to the Anglo-Siamese treaty and the Tripartite Agreement could be exploited by the British to create a positive impression of their policy. Rather than being a display of British desperation, the actions taken so far to procure the necessary rice required from Siam could be presented as a practical display of Britain's supposed desire for friendly relations with that country after the end of the war and a genuine humanitarian interest in the physical and economic wellbeing of South-East Asia.

Negotiations, however, would not produce results alone. Thompson stressed to the Foreign Office that there was now a 'real urgency in getting rice moving' out of Siam, and that sustained haggling between the two governments may result in further delays in procurement.[78] British and American officials on the CTRC in Bangkok had been working on alternative economic policies designed to obtain more rice from Siam. One of these was to offer the Siamese a period in which they would receive a premium on every ton of rice they exported. Outlining the CTRC's plans to Whitehall, Thompson stated that it was not their intention that the extra cost involved in paying this premium be placed on British finances. Instead, this would be recovered in the cost at which the rice was sold to recipient countries. Admitting that this was not an ideal situation, that British and American officials in Siam would have much preferred fixing a basic price for Siamese rice and sticking with it, Butler argued that the offering of a premium was 'the only hope' of meeting Britain's 'overriding concern' of restoring Siamese rice exports in the short term.[79]

Thompson had some doubts about the feasibility of the premium plan. He expressed his concerns to London that setting a premium on rice would lead to Siamese merchants expecting

[77] F 5555/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 10 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1.
[78] F 5614/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 11 April 1946, FO 371/53858, TNA, p.1.
[79] F 5737/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 13 April 1946, FO 371/53859, TNA, p.1.

to receive this higher price indefinitely, possibly causing issues further down the line when the premium was withdrawn.[80] Thompson described the CTRC's premium proposal as a 'gamble' as long-term estimates suggested that Siamese rice exports would be restored to a level sufficient to meet British needs by the end of 1946. Nevertheless, it was a gamble he felt worth taking. Given that the Americans had declared their support, Thompson believed that the premium scheme would represent 'a constructive initiative' on behalf of Britain and the United States to do all they could to draw more rice out of Siam and, in turn, reduce the risk of famine in the region.[81] Indeed, when discussing these further concessions to Siam with Killearn, Thompson's rhetoric (intentionally or not) appeared to mimic the Americans. Thompson described the proposed revisions to the Tripartite Agreement in Rooseveltian terms. It was a 'new deal' for South-East Asia which would raise economic and living conditions across the region through the revival of Siamese rice exports.[82] Although this 'new deal' for South-East Asia might further American support for British initiatives in Siam, local developments presented further difficulties.

On the morning of 9 June 1946, the young Siamese king Ananda Mahidol was found dead in his bedroom with a gunshot wound to his head. The sudden and mysterious death of the king caused a scandal for Pridi Banomyong's government. Unable to provide concrete proof that King Ananda's death was either a suicide or a murder, Pridi was implicated in the case. Political opponents of Pridi, including the former Prime Minister Seni Pramoj, spread rumours that it was Pridi himself who had assassinated the king.[83] Pridi's security as Prime Minister was already tenuous, having assumed the role following a vote of no confidence in the previous administration. He was, however, the Siamese statesman with whom both the British and the

[80] F 5738/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 14 April 1946, FO 371/53859, TNA, p.1.
[81] F 5738/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 14 April 1946, FO 371/53859, TNA, p.1.
[82] F 5740/3/61, Thompson to Killearn, 12 April 1946, FO 371/53859, TNA, p.1
[83] C. Baker and P. Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p.157.

Americans were most predisposed to co-operate with because of his wartime opposition to the Japanese.

In what was fortuitous timing, British and American diplomats in Bangkok finally presented the Siamese Government with an invitation to join the CTRC.[84] While the British and the Americans saw this as a means to further increase rice exports from Siam, Pridi saw it as an opportunity to shore up his own position and the invitation was accepted two weeks later.[85] Somerset Butler admitted to London that the presentation of the invitation to join the CTRC had been 'psychologically well-timed'. Butler met with Pridi and his Cabinet shortly after the invitation had been accepted to discuss what the Siamese Government could do to procure more rice. Keen to impress his willingness to work with Britain and the United States, Pridi announced a series of policies intended to increase availability of rice for export. The Siamese Government intended to requisition rice from both farmers and millers as well as ban the sale of rice except to the government itself or their authorised agencies. The possibility of Siamese Government control was extended further. Following these discussions, Butler was made aware that Pridi's cabinet were contemplating a declaration that would see all paddy and rice stocks in the country become the property of the Government for the duration of the world cereals shortage, to be distributed as and how the Government saw fit.[86] Pridi's focus on increasing Siamese rice exports was met with approval in London, with one civil servant commenting how Britain's task of feeding Malaya and Singapore would be much easier now that the Siamese Prime Minister, having 'left the clouds of murdered kings' was once more able to concentrate on the pressing matter of food supply.[87]

Despite surviving initial accusations regarding the death of the King, Pridi's future as Prime Minister was still uncertain. Senate elections were scheduled for early August.

[84] F 9929/3/61, Thompson to Direk Jayanama, 28 June 1946, FO 371/53899, TNA, p.1.
[85] F 10253/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 14 July 1946, FO 371/53891, p.1.
[86] F 10417/3/61, Somerset Butler to Nathan, 17 July 1946, FO 371/53893, TNA, p.1.
[87] F 10418/3/61, Minute by Errock, 18 July 1946, FO 371/53893, TNA.

Thompson hoped for a Pridi victory, reinforcing the Prime Minister's position and hence increasing the likelihood of procuring more rice from Siam for British colonial territories. Both Malaya and Singapore had to cut their rice ration because of a shortfall in supplies from Siam, which the Governor of Singapore attributed to the political chaos in the country and the total breakdown of official government procurement.[88] Thompson warned London, however, that the Siamese administration was still 'extremely inefficient' and the 'vested interests' of rice millers and merchants were still a powerful factor. Pridi, should he remain Prime Minister, had to do more to prove to these groups that they would gain nothing from refusing to co-operate with the government.[89]

British hopes for a continued Pridi ministry were short-lived. Despite electoral victory (Pridi's supporters claimed 57 seats to his opponents combined total of 18) Pridi resigned on 21 August, unable to shake off his association with the King's death. In his place, Thawan Thamrongnawasawat, a minister in Pridi's administration, assumed the role of Prime Minister and maintained most of Pridi's cabinet, including Direk Jayanama as Foreign Minister. On 26 August, Thamrong and Direk held a meeting with Thompson. Thamrong told Thompson that he was shocked by Siam's failure to reach its rice export targets and that it would be his main objective to rectify this.[90] While Thompson informed London that he had been encouraged by these early discussions, other British officials were less optimistic. The Ministry of Food had telegrammed its staff at the British Food Mission in Washington that the situation remained much the same. While the government may have changed, there was still a powerful bloc of millers and merchants which were obstructing British effort to procure rice.[91]

[88] F 11807/3/61, Gimson to Hall, FO 371/53901, TNA, p.6.
[89] F 10582/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, FO 371/53894, 21 July 1946, TNA, p.1.
[90] F 12413/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, FO 371/53905, 26 August 1946, TNA, p.1
[91] F 12413/2/61, Ministry of Food to British Food Mission, Washington, 26 August 1946, FO 371/53905, TNA, p.1

Indeed, the final four months of 1946 settled into a similar pattern as had the rest of the year. The rice ration in Malaya and Singapore remained at its lowest level since the end of the war. Thompson and Butler persistently pressed London to grant more concessions, a further increase in price, more shipments of consumer goods, to break the hold of millers and merchants over Siamese rice supplies. The Treasury, understandably, remained reluctant. Previous adjustments to the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty, for instance, had not produced a noticeable increase in available rice supplies. Resolution to this issue did not originate in either Bangkok or London but rather was found in Washington. On 25 October, Sanderson met with Abbot Low Moffat, head of the State Department's South-East Asia Division, to request extension of the CTRC until September 1947.[92] Under the terms of the original Tripartite Agreement, the CTRC was due to close down in March 1947. Despite unsatisfactory results, the CTRC had become a crucial part of Britain's machinery to procure rice from Siam, making assessments of the quantity and quality of Siamese rice and fixing prices with the government. Over the next week, Sanderson continued to discuss amendments to the Tripartite Agreement with State Department representatives. At the end of these talks, the Americans agreed to the extension of the CTRC on the condition that Britain halve its demands on Siamese rice from 1.2 million to 600,000 tons and agree an increase in price to £17 per ton plus an extra £4 in export tax. Sanderson relayed details of this discussion back to London where they were discussed by the SEAF Committee. Despite comment that these amendments were 'a high price to pay' for American agreement, the committee concluded that proposed changes should be accepted 'in the hope that it would help to secure United States co-operation and thereby larger exports.'[93]

The SEAF Committee conclusions were telegraphed to Thompson in mid-November with an instruction for him to start negotiations with Edwin F. Stanton, the American Envoy to Siam,

[92] Document 762, Memorandum of Conversation by the Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, 25 October 1946, *FRUS 1946 Vol. VIII*.
[93] SEAF (46) 21st Meeting, 8 November 1946, CAB 134/677, TNA, p.2.

over a revised deal.[94] The same issues that had plagued previous Anglo-American discussions in Bangkok were on show again. Thompson told the Foreign Office that the Americans were not really interested in improving Siamese rice exports and instead were 'acting to protect Siam against British demands which in their view threaten economic health of [Siam].'[95] In an effort to break this deadlock, Thompson suggested a further rise in price at his own initiative. Without London's permission, Thompson told the Americans that Britain could pay £20 per ton for Siamese rice. Thompson's intervention appears to have persuaded the Americans. Text of the revised Tripartite Agreement was sent to London in late November along with a separate note from Thompson explaining his actions.[96] This was discussed at the SEAF Committee. In a heated debate, the Treasury rejected the increase in price. Norman Young, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, said that there was no guarantee that increasing the price to £20 per ton would lead to more rice being made available. Britain already had an agreement with the United States for a price of £16 which the Americans should be made to honour. Sanderson stressed that this deal was already outdated. The world price of rice was now much higher and Britan had to offer Siam something equal to that or risk losing out on Siamese rice supplies altogether. This was supported by Dening who argued that, given the Americans interest in protecting Siam, there was no possibility of them agreeing to keep the price of rice as low as £16 per ton. With exception of the Treasury, the committee agreed that Britain had to come to an agreement with the Americans 'without delay' and approved the increase in price.[97]

The final revisions to the Tripartite Agreement were presented to the Siamese Government on Christmas Eve 1946. The British and American Governments agreed on an export figure of £20 per ton with a further export tax of £4. The British also agreed to halve their demands of rice from Siam down to 600,000 tons delivered between 1 January and 31

[94] F 15589/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 15 November 1946, FO 371/53928, TNA, pp.1-2.
[95] F 17061/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 26 November 1946, FO 371/53936, TNA, p.2.
[96] F 171793/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 November 1946, FO 371/53936, TNA, p.1.
[97] SEAF (46) 23rd Meeting, 13 December 1946, CAB 134/677, pp.1-2.

August 1947. The short-fall penalty would remain in place but would only be applied in reference to the new target export figure. These revisions, the British and American diplomats hoped, would 'prove attractive not only to the Siamese Government but also to all trading and producing interests concerned with the economic welfare of Siam.'[98] The proposals certainly did appear attractive to the Siamese Government which accepted them only hours after their receipt.[99]

The Tripartite Agreement in Operation

Despite the extension of the Tripartite Agreement, the MoF believed that Britain had been outmanoeuvred by the Americans and the Siamese. E.L. Ridley, Deputy Director of Rice at the Ministry, wrote to the Foreign Office accusing the Siamese Government of deliberately presenting smaller quantities of rice for export to the IEFC for allocation than they had available in an attempt to avoid the penalty clause of the Tripartite Agreement. This was done, according to Ridley, with the full encouragement of the Americans.[100] While Siamese rice exports exceeded expectations in the first quarter of 1947, British officials in Bangkok had reason to believe this would not last. Butler told Thompson that the uncertainty surrounding the nature of official procurement after the Tripartite Agreement expired on 31 August 1947 would lead to further reductions in availability as rice growers and merchants might once again hold onto their stocks in the hope of a possible increase in price.[101] Thompson and Butler met with their American counterparts to discuss procurement arrangements after the termination of the agreement. All were agreed that some form of international control over Siamese rice was 'essential' so long as the South-East Asian rice shortage continued. What form this international control was to take was up for debate. Three alternatives were discussed, as Thompson set out:

a) that the Ministry of Food should contract with the Government of Siam to purchase entire rice surplus over as long a period as possible without naming any quantity but at

[98] F 197/2/61, Memorandum of Understanding, 24 December 1946, FO 371/63463, TNA, pp.1-2.
[99] F 197/2/61, Direk Jayanama to Thompson 24 December 1946, FO 371/63643, TNA, p.1.
[100] F 351/2/61, Ridley to Whitteridge, 8 January 1947, FO 371/63464, TNA, pp.1-2.
[101] F 4242/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 21 March 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.1.

named prices, for distribution by His Majesty's Government in accordance with IEFC allocations;

b) that the Government of Siam should enter into agreement with individual recipient countries at prices previously agreed between say, British Government, United States Government and Government of Siam;
c) that Government of Siam should enter into no specific agreement with any specific nation, but would make a public declaration that she would over a named period make her surplus rice available for export in accordance with IEFC or successor body allocations at named prices.[102]

The first, while the preferred option of the British, was ruled out due to American disapproval. The second was viewed as 'unwieldly' as the process of agreeing shipments at prices fixed by the Tripartite Agreement between Siam and individual countries would lead to the British and American governments being 'unnecessarily involved' in this transaction. While the third was the most acceptable to the Americans and thought workable by Butler, Thompson doubted that the Siamese Government could be persuaded to make such a declaration without promise of reward. To tempt the Siamese into the announcement, it was agreed between Thompson and Stanton, that the time had finally come to offer the Siamese a price either close or equivalent to the price being paid to Burma and French Indochina for their rice.[103]

The three alternative proposals for future international control of Siamese rice were discussed by a working party of the SEAF Committee in London. Sanderson had just returned from Bangkok and told the working party that, in his opinion, it was in the Siamese Government's own interest to declare future availability of their rice for international allocation irrespective of whether they were offered the inducement of a higher price. If they did not do this, Sanderson said, the Siamese administration ran the risk of losing foreign exchange, a rise in the cost of living, and ultimately being subject to the short-fall penalty clause. While the decision to offer a higher price had been made in consultation with American diplomatic staff in Bangkok, Sanderson preferred that any discussion over rice prices be conducted solely between the British and Siamese. The working party, however, were of the view that the support

[102] F 4242/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 21 March 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.2.
[103] F 4242/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 21 March 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.3.

of the United States Government was vital, fearing that the Siamese 'might be encouraged by the Americans to adopt a more uncompromising attitude' towards the British as had been the case in 1946.[104] With the United States unwilling to agree to a further extension of the Tripartite Agreement beyond the end of August, Sanderson concluded that it should be recommended to the Siamese Government that they double their export tax, as proposed by Thompson and Stanton, lifting the price of Siamese rice from £26 per ton to £30. In making this recommendation, Sanderson hoped to retain the initiative for Britain. He expressed his fear that Siam would act unilaterally, perhaps imposing an export tax larger than what was proposed, in the absence of a defined British procurement policy to come into force after the expiration of the Tripartite Agreement.[105] While the Treasury argued that doubling the export tax was 'inconsistent with our general policy of encouraging the Siamese by all means within our power to keep the price of rice at a low figure' it was accepted by the working party as the best means of maintaining some form of international control.[106]

London's acceptance of these plans was communicated to Thompson a few days later. Thompson was instructed to approach the Siamese Government and inform them of the decision that the British were prepared to agree to an increase in the export tax on the condition that the Siamese Government agree to adhere to IEFC allocations and maintain this increased price of rice through to the end of 1948.[107] Lord Inverchapel, British Ambassador to the United States, was simultaneously given instructions to inform the State Department of London's plan and ask if Stanton would make joint representation with Thompson to the Siamese in Bangkok.[108] A few days later, Stanton received a memorandum from the State Department of which he handed copies to both Thompson and Butler. The Americans wanted the Siamese to announce

[104] GEN 157/3rd Meeting, 1 April 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.2
[105] GEN 157/3rd Meeting, 1 April 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.4.
[106] GEN 157/3rd Meeting, 1 April 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.5.
[107] F 4342/2/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 3 April 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.2
[108] F 4342/2/61, Foreign Office to Inverchapel, 5 April 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.1.

that they would maintain prices paid to the rice merchants for the present crop until the next harvest began in December. While acknowledging that the Siamese might then want to remove price controls from January 1948 to cover the next harvest, Washington endorsed Thompson and Stanton's joint proposal to induce the Siamese to further declare that they intended to sell their surplus rice in accordance with IEFC allocations at a fixed price. The State Department were not, however, in favour of Siam's surplus rice being subject to exclusive bulk purchase by the British.[109] In forwarding Stanton's instructions on to London, Thompson commented that, in their attempt 'to appear in Siamese eyes in negotiations as [a] disinterested friend', the Americans had revealed that they had 'tired of our policy of seeking Siamese rice on the cheap and they are less concerned with the needs of British deficit areas … than in benefitting the economic health of [Siam] and incidentally their own exchange position.'[110] Thompson felt that 'whatever the extent of self-interest' in the State Department's terms, their appraisal was a 'realistic view' of the problem and that a united Anglo-American front was therefore most likely to result in maintaining Siamese rice export at the level required to feed British colonial territories in South-East Asia. It was agreed that Stanton and Thompson would make a joint approach to the Siamese Government, asking them of their planned rice policy after the cessation of the Tripartite Agreement. The decision to hand the initiative to the Siamese Government was done at the behest of the Americans who did not want to appear to be imposing a particular policy on Siam.[111]

Unbeknown to Thompson, London had been working on an alternative plan to induce Siam to further co-operate with Britain. From January to March 1946, the Siamese had provided the British with only 132,855 tons of rice under the free rice clause of the Anglo-Siamese treaty prior to its revision. This free rice had then been sold on by the British to recipient territories of

[109] F 5682/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 25 April 1947, FO 371/63477, TNA, pp.1-2.
[110] F 5758/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 25 April 1947, FO 371/63477, TNA, p.1.
[111] F 5758/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 25 April 1947, FO 371/63477, TNA, pp.1-2.

IEFC allocations for a profit of just over £1.5 million.[112] Having previously told the United States that Britain had no intention of profiting from the free rice clause, an interdepartmental meeting was held at the Foreign Office to discuss how best to dispose of the proceeds. On the one hand, the Treasury, India Office and Foreign Office agreed that the money should be divided between all claimants on Siamese rice in proportion to their international allocation for the three-month period in which free rice was delivered. On the other hand, both the Colonial Office and Burma Office unsurprisingly argued that the money be shared only between British territories in South-East Asia to secure some form of reparation from Siam who had failed to meet their original treaty obligations.[113] Sanderson put forward a third possibility. He suggested the profits should be returned to Siam in exchange for an assurance from the Siamese Government that they would not raise the price of rice, outlining the 'many advantages' he felt that this would have for Britain.

> Firstly it would give us political kudos, secondly it would mean that when next the question of increasing the price of Siamese rice was raised, we would be starting from the present low bargaining base, and thirdly we would be avoiding the probability that many countries would be dissatisfied with whatever alternative (and arbitrary) decision we might reach.[114]

Following lengthy discussions, the meeting agreed with Sanderson's proposal. Alongside the proposed refund, London had also given final approval to allowing Siam to raise the export tax on rice, not to £8 as previously suggested but to £6.10s, lifting the price of Siamese rice to £28.10s per ton.[115] When Thompson found out about London's planning, he was heavily critical, accusing Whitehall of a 'persistent hesitation' to accept the realities of the situation in Bangkok.

> I beg you most earnestly to believe that crux of problem here is not how best to induce Siamese Government to co-operate in rice procurement (which during last year anyway they have done to the best of their limited ability and power) but how to make it worthwhile for those who control trade and actually hold the rice (that is, the Chinese merchants) to sell to Government … experience having shown that these people cannot be compelled to hand over their stocks … It all boils down to the remorseless fact that complicated control schemes cannot be enforced in primitive oriental countries and especially does this apply

[112] F 2106/2/61, Young to Dening, 17 February 1947, FO 371/63648, TNA, p.1.
[113] F 2106/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 1 April 1947, FO 371/63648, TNA.
[114] F 2106/2/61, Minutes of Meeting held at the Foreign Office, 17 April 1947, FO 371/63648, TNA, p.2.
[115] F 4342/2/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 26 April 1947, FO 371/63473, TNA, p.2.

> in Siam whose economy is in the hands of foreigners who are not interested in co-operating with Siamese Government if by doing so their own pockets suffer.[116]

Thompson discussed the proposed refund and rise in export tax with both Stanton and Butler who also disagreed with the proposal. The American ambassador was particularly negative, having lost faith in the policy of offering the Siamese Government financial incentives to improve procurement. He was 'unsympathetic' to a scheme which, in his opinion, was designed to allow British territories to retain cheap rice imports from Siam.[117] Thompson found further allies in the Special Commission in Singapore. Michael Wright, Deputy to Lord Killearn, wrote to the Foreign Office expressing his agreement with Thompson and the importance of persuading the Chinese merchants to sell their rice to the Siamese Government. To do this, Wright suggested considering the partial restoration of commercial procurement of rice in Siam, beginning to gradually reduce the role of the Siamese Government in the process of buying rice.[118]

What London's scheming has so far highlighted is a stunning lack of awareness amongst British policy-makers in Whitehall compared to those on the ground in South-East Asia which resulted in British officials undermining their own aims and policies. These differences in understanding were most stark in regard to the agency of local stakeholders, in this case the Siamese Government and Chinese rice merchants in Siam. On the one hand, the Siamese Government were heavily dependent on Chinese merchants to source rice. On the other hand, the Chinese were reluctant to sell to the government. As might be expected, the Chinese preferred that their rice was used to relieve food shortages in China.[119] Aware that the most likely recipient of the majority of their rice would be the British, Chinese merchants returned to hoarding rice, driving a black market trade of rice from Siam which had adverse effects on

[116] F 5849/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 28 April 1947, FO 371/63477, TNA, pp.1-2
[117] F 5937/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 29 April 1947, FO 371/63478, TNA, p.1.
[118] F 6049/2/61, Wright to Foreign Office, 2 May 1947, FO 371/63478, TNA, p.1.
[119] G.W. Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), pp.287-288.

both the Siamese economy and contributed to the increasing official price of rice in South-East Asia which the British were trying to keep down.

At the end of April, the Siamese Ministry of Commerce announced they would be maintaining both the price and government control of rice through to the end of 1947.[120] This announcement, coupled with Thompson's excoriation of the refund policy, led London to reassess it plans, beginning with a discussion of the news at the SEAF Committee working party in May. Charing the meeting, Kenneth Christofas, of the Foreign Office South-East Asia Department, remarked that the only measure that had so far successfully led to an increase in rice exports from Siam had been the short-lived policy introduced by the Siamese Government (without reference to Britain) for six weeks in 1946 to offer the merchants three per cent export of rice tax free. Sanderson remained opposed to the idea of offering increasingly lucrative incentives to merchants. He told the working party that he could not understand why Thompson was so keen to try and close the gap between the official price of £25 per ton and the £170 per ton that merchants could achieve on the black market. The ambassador's suggestion that the Siamese Government return to the inducement of offering merchants an as yet unspecified percentage of tax free export on rice might lead to the export price rising to around £100 per ton, at which point British colonial territories would no longer be able to afford to purchase rice from Siam.[121] Instead, Sanderson suggested that Thompson put forward restoring the three per cent bonus as previously offered by the Siamese Government. The working party agreed and hence the refund proposal was withdrawn.[122] Thompson appeared to have got his way, convincing London that the real problem was not between Siam and Britain but between the Siamese Government and merchants. A telegram was sent to him detailing the results of this meeting, with the comment that London now shared his view that, to stand a chance of

[120] F 5938/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 30 April 1947, FO 371/63478, TNA, p.1.
[121] GEN 157/5th Meeting, 1 May 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.2.
[122] GEN 157/5th Meeting, 1 May 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.3.

successfully increasing rice exports, British policy must appeal direct to rice traders 'by giving them more freedom and greater profits.'[123]

The gradual return to commercial procurement was favoured by British officials throughout South-East Asia. In early May, Butler held informal meetings in Singapore with representatives from the government of that colony as well as that of the Malayan Union. The CTRC was due to be dissolved upon cessation of the Tripartite Agreement at the end of August. At this meeting, it was suggested that the joint commission be replaced by a new committee based in Bangkok, constituted of representatives from each territory which received Siamese rice under IEFC allocation, including British colonies such as Malaya and Hong Kong.[124] Thompson continued to consult with Butler upon the latter's return from Singapore, informing London of the outcomes of their discussions. The two agreed that even increasing the official export price to £100 would not be attractive enough for merchants to sell their produce to the Siamese Government. The 'only real solution' to the problem of ensuring the maximum procurement of rice for official export was 'to remove all control and operate on free market.'[125] Thompson's telegram, however, revealed another weakness of British procurement policy in Siam. Despite attempts to bring rice smuggling under control, Thompson admitted that the illegal trade had 'become essential to the well-being of Malaya.' Both Malaya and Singapore were able to supplement their IEFC allocation with illicitly acquired produce which, while detrimental to Britain's declared interest of helping to revive the Siamese economy through payments for official rice export, had helped to sustain the colonies when these official exports had often fallen short of predicted levels.[126]

Butler, given his experience of the Siamese rice trade, attempted to clarify to Thompson what he believed to be the best option for facilitating an increase in official rice exports from

[123] F 5937/2/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 8 May 1947, FO 371/63478, TNA, p.1.
[124] F 6711/2/61, Wright to Dening, 15 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.1.
[125] F 6792/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 19 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.1.
[126] F 6792/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 19 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.2.

Siam after the end of the Tripartite Agreement. Butler argued that the role of the Siamese Government should be significantly reduced. The Rice Purchasing Bureau (RPB), the Siamese Government agency tasked with procuring and contracting rice for official export, should be cut out of the system. The RPB was responsible for selling paddy to millers who then sold the milled rice back to the Siamese Government for re-sale to the British. Abolishing the RPB would mean that buying agencies for recipient territories dealt directly with the millers themselves and put the onus on the Siamese Government to ensure that they were providing the millers with enough paddy to meet export allocations. Responsibility for arranging export would be transferred to the committee intended to replace the CTRC, with contracts for rice signed directly between shipping companies and the millers. Butler clearly expected some backlash from the Siamese. To minimise this, he suggested that they be allowed a representative on the new committee who would act as chairman.[127] This was raised with Stanton who suggested a simpler version of the proposed committee which would be made up of personnel from the official commercial purchasing agents of each recipient territory rather than delegates from the interested governments themselves.[128] Thompson forwarded both Butler and Stanton's view to Whitehall where Sanderson, in consultation with the SEAF working party, drafted a reply. London settled on a compromise between Butler and Stanton's proposals for the new committee, deciding that countries should be represented by staff from the various buying agencies or, when a country did not have its own agent, by a government official instead. Where Sanderson and his working party colleagues differed from British officials in Bangkok was on the position of Siam in this new committee. If it really was Britain's intention to sideline the Siamese Government, Sanderson felt that allowing a Siamese delegate to chair the recipient committee was counterintuitive. Instead, he sought to assert British authority, suggesting that chairmanship of the committee be first offered to representatives from British territories. The

[127] F 7134/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 26 May 1947, FO 371/63481, TNA, pp.1-2.
[128] F 7085/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 26 May 1947, FO 371/63481, TNA, p.1.

MoF, in its capacity as the official agent for the United Kingdom and British colonies, would have one representative on the committee who Sanderson suggested might act as its secretary.[129]

Despite Sanderson's plan to impose British control over official rice procurement, British officials in Bangkok remained unconvinced. Butler thought that a committee of buying agents was 'unwise and impracticable.' After all, the idea for a replacement committee consisting of government representatives had first been suggested to him by the governments of the Malayan Union and Singapore in an attempt by them to gain more influence over rice procurement. Changing to a committee of commercial agents would 'completely defeat' their objective.[130] Thompson preferred to hand the initiative back again to the Siamese, informing London that he saw 'little alternative' than to ask the Siamese Government for their views before engaging in a three-way discussion with the Americans.[131] Thompson followed this up with further information about the American standpoint. Both Stanton and the State Department now felt that, so long as the Siamese Government intended to maintain control over rice for a period after the termination of the Tripartite Agreement, abolishment of the RPB was now 'undesirable'. The Americans had also dropped their preference for increasing the export tax, on rice which they had initially agreed upon with the British, and no longer felt there needed to be any representative committee, commercial or political, to take the place of the CTRC in Bangkok.[132] Casting a cynical eye over the American change of heart, Thompson told London he had the impression that the United States was becoming 'less and less interested' in the issue of increasing official rice exports from Siam. The only reason the Americans were still paying some attention to the subject was because of their previously expressed desire to help Siam

[129] F 7134/2/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 6 June 1947, FO 371/63481, TNA, p.2.
[130] F 7994/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 13 June 1947, FO 371/63483, TNA, p.1.
[131] F 7994/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 13 June 1947, FO 371/63483, TNA, p.2.
[132] F 8122/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 17 June 1947, FO 371/63483, TNA, p.1.

recover its economy through acquiring foreign exchange by sales of rice and the fact that they did not feel they could trust the British to deal with Siam alone.[133]

In early July, Thompson, Butler, and Stanton were called into a meeting with Thawan Thamrongnawasawat and other high-ranking members of his cabinet including the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Commerce. Thamrong reiterated that his government were determined to make available the maximum possible quantity of rice for official export. He urged the British and Americans that an increase in the export tax to £8 per ton (to which the British had previously consented) was the best way of achieving this.[134] When the discussion turned to mechanisms for official procurement after the end of the Tripartite Agreement, Thompson found that the Siamese Government had not yet devoted 'any serious thought' to the subject. Upon this discovery, Thompson told London that he felt that he had to take charge of the situation, outlining Britain's proposal of dissolving the RPB and setting up a committee of representatives from recipient territories to replace the CTRC. To Thompson's surprise, Stanton did not voice any objections to British policy as the American ambassador declared only that the United States Government did not feel that it needed to be directly represented on the proposed committee.[135]

While it appeared that the Americans were now closer in opinion to the British, one issue remained unresolved: the shortfall penalty clause. Under the revised terms of the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty, Siam would be obliged to provide the British any shortfall on the 1.2 million tons it had promised for free after 1 September 1947. When the SEAF working party met to decide on Thompson's instructions, it was decided that no mention of the penalty clause should be made to either the Siamese or American diplomatic staff in Bangkok. The United States had made its disapproval clear when the clause was first suggested in 1946 and London

[133] F 8059/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 18 June 1947, FO 371/63483, TNA, p.1.
[134] F 8964/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 2 July 1947, FO 371/63484, TNA, p.1.
[135] F 8964/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 2 July 1947, FO 371/63484, TNA, p.1.

preferred to hold it in reserve, a 'weapon' for use in post-Tripartite Agreement negotiations with the Siamese.[136] Now, the matter took on a particular urgency in Whitehall with the deadline fast approaching. At the next meeting of the working party, Christofas suggested that ultimately Britain would have to forego the penalty clause. They should, however, seek to make 'maximum tactical use' of it while the threat of its application remained. Britain should offer to surrender the clause in exchange for a commitment from the Siamese Government that it would adhere to international allocations, retain control over rice prices, and promise that they would not raise export prices throughout the whole of 1948.[137]

The Siamese Government were able, once again, to outmanoeuvre the British. The Prime Minister called another meeting with Thompson, attended also by Butler and Stanton, to discuss the proposals previously put to him and his cabinet. Drawing attention to the decline in Siamese rice exports, Thamrong again told the assembled diplomats the best way to reverse this downwards trend was to increase the export tax to £8 per ton but this time also pushed for parity with the price which Britain was paying for rice from Burma. Thompson told the Prime Minister that previous increases in the price of rice had not had the desired effect of increasing exports. Britain had made concessions to Siam in the past with no appreciable return and that Thamrong was asking the British 'to pay more and more for less rice.'[138] Again this news was referred to the SEAF working party. Christofas told the meeting that he felt Britain had numerous options. Firstly, they could appease Siam, agreeing to an increase in the export tax and foregoing the penalty clause. Secondly, they could seek some form of compromise. The third option, one favoured by Christofas, was to 'stand firm' and allow the penalty clause to come into effect unless the Siamese conceded to British demands. The inducements offered to Siam had only resulted in an average export of 30,000 tons a month. If the short-fall clause was invoked, Siam

[136] GEN 157/9th Meeting, 23 June 1947, CAB 134/15, TNA, p.3.
[137] GEN 157/10th Meeting, 16 July 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, pp.2-3.
[138] F 10258/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, FO 371/63487, TNA, p.1.

would be obliged to provide around 300,000 tons of rice to Britain for free. The working party were divided about the possible application of the penalty clause. Representatives from the MoF were opposed to using it essentially to blackmail Siam. Indeed, they argued, this might have wider repercussions on the international system of allocation that Britain had worked to implement and encourage others in South-East Asia to adhere to. As they told the meeting, 'the ruling conditions' in the region 'were those of a seller's market and Siam and Burma were in a position to dictate terms … every effort should be made to keep Siam in the IEFC for if she broke away, so would Burma.' A short-term consequence of the penalty clause coming into effect was the possible cessation of official exports from Siam, unacceptable to British colonial governments that were dependent on rice from Siam.[139] Despite these protests, the working party agreed that, with only one month to go until the clause expired, it remained a useful tool to compel Siam to export more rice to Britain, and they instructed Thompson to wait for a Siamese response.[140]

Thompson remained critical of the penalty clause, telling London that it was a 'definite handicap' in his negotiations with the Siamese Government. Alive to the anti-imperial currents in post-war South-East Asia with which Britain was having to contend, Thompson said that threatening to penalise Siam would breed only further 'ill-will and distrust at a time when the Orients are not disposed to be treated as inferiors.'[141] His argument gained weight when he was informed by Atthakit Banomyong, the Siamese Foreign Minister, that the Siamese Government would co-operate with the IEFC and export rice in accordance with international allocations throughout 1948. Atthakit stressed that, with Siam having now agreed to do this, the British give 'sympathetic consideration' for 'a fair and equitable price' for Siamese rice. When Thompson pressed Atthakit as to what this actually entailed, the Foreign Minister replied 'the

[139] GEN 157/11th Meeting, 1 August 1947, CAB 130/15, TNA, p.2.
[140] F 10258/3/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 2 August 1947, FO 371/63487, TNA, p.1.
[141] F 10497/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 4 August 1947, FO 371/63488, TNA, p.1.

same price as paid in Burma.'[142] In relaying details of this discussion to the Foreign Office, Thompson said that Britain was 'confronted with what is nothing less than a refusal on the part of the Siamese Government to be treated less favourably than Burma.' In his opinion, it was time for Britain to deal with Siam 'as an equal rather than as an inferior.' He recommended that Britain should offer to pay Siam the same price for rice as they were paying Burma in exchange for an undertaking that the Siamese Government would maintain control over rice throughout 1948. Once this undertaking had been received, Thompson said that Britain should subsequently abandon the short-fall penalty clause.[143]

Thompson's recommendation received enthusiastic support from Killearn. The Special Commissioner had just visited Bangkok and told his superiors in London that he felt agreeing to an increase in the price of Siamese rice would be to the benefit of British influence in the region which needed 'every support we can give it.' Raising the price would, Killearn argued, help to 'restrain the pan-Asiatic impulses that are so plainly at work in South-East Asia.'[144] The Foreign Office did not agree with Killearn's analysis. Rather than restraining the local anti-imperial trend emerging across Asia that was apparently threatening Britain's position, Christofas minuted that raising the price could possibly create more issues than Killearn felt it would solve, as it might 'infuriate the importing countries (who are of course Asiatic) and perhaps encourage Burma to think in terms of price increases for her own 1948 crop.'[145] Nevertheless Christofas felt compelled to agree with the decision to raise the price, not because of the 'idealistic' reasoning of Lord Killearn, but rather because it was an 'inevitability' to which Britain had been driven by the course of events.[146] On 29 August, just two days before the Tripartite Agreement was due to expire and the penalty clause come into force, London

[142] F 10563/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 6 August 1947, FO 371/63488, TNA, p.1.
[143] F 10707/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 6 August 1947, FO 371/63488, TNA, pp.1-2.
[144] F 11242/2/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 14 August 1947, FO 371/63489, TNA, p.1.
[145] F 11242/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 19 August 1947, FO 371/63489, TNA.
[146] F 11242/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 19 August 1947, FO 371/63489, TNA.

authorised Thompson to approach the Siamese Government along the lines he had recommended. Britain was prepared to offer Siam the same price as it paid for Burmese rice, £31 per ton, in exchange for the Siamese Government agreeing to maintain control over rice until the end of 1948. If the Siamese were prepared to do this, Britain would also agree to abandon the penalty clause.[147] Ultimately, the Siamese Government accepted with the Foreign Minister notifying Thompson on 2 September.[148]

Conclusion

London's rice policy towards Siam encapsulates the changing nature of British power after the Second World War, forced to reckon with the agency of independent stakeholders and ultimately treat Siam as an equal power. Writing to Bevin in September 1947, Thompson described British efforts to procure rice from Siam as 'a failure from its very start'. From the initial attempt to force Siam into providing 1.5 million tons for free, to the system in which Britain would pay for rice delivered before 31 August 1947 up to 1.2 million tons and any shortfall provided for nothing, and then eventually to the abandonment of this latter policy in favour of commercial procurement, Britain never once appeared in control of the situation. Final accounts show that for all the early promise, Siam provided Britain with just over half, around 800,000 tons, of what it was originally obliged to sell under the terms of the Anglo-Siamese Peace Treaty, delivered at a cost of £9.9 million.[149] The Siamese were able to play on British fears regarding civil unrest in Malaya and Singapore due to food shortages, extracting various concessions from London throughout the post-war period in exchange for the promise of more rice. Not all were blind to this reality. British officials on the ground recognised (and often relayed to superiors in Whitehall) that dealing with Siam on a basis of equality would be the most likely way to acquire the rice supplies needed to feed Malaya and Singapore. While

[147] F 11758/2/61, Foreign Office to Thompson, 29 August 1947, FO 371/63489, TNA, p.1.
[148] F 12093/2/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 2 September 1947, FO 371/63490, TNA, p.2.
[149] F 12590/2/61, Thompson to Bevin, 4 September 1947, FO 371/63492, TNA, p.1.

London was slow to recognise this, ultimately working with the Siamese had more benefits than just guaranteeing supplies of rice for British colonial territories in South-East Asia. It allowed for Britain to display to local populations that it was a benevolent imperial power as it sought to pacify the anti-imperial and nationalist sentiments which threatened to undermine its authority in the region.

5: Burma

Whereas this thesis has so far dealt with British efforts to encourage food production in its own colonial territory and to procure rice from an independent country, this chapter focuses on the case of Burma. Burma was a colony that had been promised eventual self-government by Britain prior to the Second World War. This chapter examines Britain's attempt to fulfil that promise while trying to remain in control over the territory's much-need rice supplies. Burmese rice had played an influential part in British policy in the colony ever since its piecemeal annexation into the British Raj through a series of wars (1824-26, 1852-53, 1885) between Britain and the Burmese Empire. While some historians have argued that the need to defend India from the French was the determining factor in Britain's complete acquisition of Burma in 1885, more recent analysis by Anthony Webster has placed the British conquest firmly in the 'gentlemanly capitalist' school of British imperial history which emphasises the economic aspect of late-Victorian British imperialist expansion.[1] The British conquest led to the rapid development of rice growing, acreage in the region increasing by 600 per cent between 1860 and the end of the 1920s.[2] Rice exports therefore became a key feature of British Burma's economy and would remain so until the outbreak of the Second World War

The Second World War had a devastating effect on Burma as the colony became the main theatre of conflict between Britain and Japan. It was invaded twice during the war, first by the Japanese in 1942 and then by the British in 1944 which culminated in the liberation of Rangoon in May 1945. The Japanese occupation was a key moment in the development of Burmese nationalism. Prior to the conflict, nationalist leader Aung San had established links with Tokyo who provided him and 29 other key Burma nationalist leaders, known as the Thirty Comrades, with political and military training. The Burma Independence Army (later the Burma National

[1] D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, (London: St Martin's Press, 1968), pp.636-640; J.F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), pp.116-121; A. Webster, 'Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885', *The Historical Journal*, 43:4, 2000, pp.1003-1025.
[2] M.W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.6.

Army/BNA) spawned from this group and fought with the Japanese during the initial stages of invasion.[3] In 1943, the Japanese gave Burma nominal independence within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Aung San, however, soon detected that this was a ruse as Japan continued to exploit Burma and set about contacting the British. He offered Mountbatten the support of the BNA in any effort to liberate Burma and in March 1945, BNA forces turned on the Japanese occupiers.[4] The Allies also carried out a strategic bombing campaign in Burma to support the British land forces which caused significant damage to the colony's infrastructure and economy. Burma's railway network had been near seriously disrupted. Only 50 of its trains and two-thirds of its freight wagons had survived the war and only 800 miles of railway track had been repaired and reopened by the end of December 1945.[5] It is within this context of political tumult and economic dislocation that the British justified a period of their restored control over Burma. As they put it, it would stabilise the territory, rehabilitate its economy, and allow Burma, eventually, to continue on the path towards self-government.

This chapter sets out to explore how Britain's short-term need for rice for Malaya and Singapore played a key role in defining Anglo-Burmese relations after the Second World War. The desire for continued access to Burmese rice became a key feature in shaping British policy towards Burma and helps to explain why British policy evolved as it did. From the immediate reimposition of colonial rule to Burma's independence outside of the Commonwealth, consideration over food supply came to define British policy as they sought the most likely method to ensure that they remained able to draw on Burmese rice.

The Return of British Rule

As they had in Malaya, the British established a Military Administration in Burma to govern the colony before the restoration of civil government. Unlike Malaya, however, a

[3] Charney, *Modern Burma*, p.50.
[4] Bayly and Harper*, Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan*, (London: Penguin, 2005), pp.428-434.
[5] Charney, *Modern Burma*, p.58.

significant portion of Burmese territory had already been liberated prior to the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Once the colony's main export, Burma's average annual rice production halved during Japanese occupation. The BMA recognised the immediate importance of a restored rice industry to both Burma's economy and also Britain's wider efforts to prevent famine in the region after the war had ended and undertook several ambitious schemes to improve rice production in the colony. In March 1945, for instance, the military assumed direct responsibility for the maintenance and operation of rice mills in liberated areas. Faced with internal food shortages in Burma, the BMA introduced a requisitioning scheme in May 1945 to buy up excess rice from surplus areas and redistribute it to deficit areas in Burma as well as for export to contribute to Britan's regional famine relief policies. To increase production, the BMA made agricultural tools available to farmers on a credit basis. The official history of the Britain's post-war military administrations in Asia note that the BMA's schemes in Burma were handicapped by the ad-hoc nature in which they evolved, often decided upon last minute, and lacked experienced staff to carry them out. Nevertheless, they are described as 'being more successful than anyone had a right to expect.' By the end of the period of military administration, over 445,000 tons of rice had been purchased by the BMA, of which 94,000 tons were set aside for internal shortages and a further 177,000 successfully exported to Malaya and India.[6]

Civil government was finally restored in mid-October 1945. Reginald Dorman-Smith, the pre-war colonial governor, returned to his position. Following this, Whitehall sought to further rehabilitate the Burmese rice industry to contribute towards the famine prevention effort in Malaya. Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, Secretary of State for India and Burma, pressed Dorman-Smith to get more rice out of Burma. While committing to export 'every ounce' of Burmese rice 'that can safely be spared', Dorman-Smith informed Pethick-Lawrence that there was no

[6] F.S.V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East 1943-1946*, (London: HMSO, 1956), pp.263-267.

prospect of the 1946-47 rice crop being anywhere comparable to Burma's pre-war yield.[7] He cited a shortage of personal transport, plough cattle, and capital in Burma as reasons for the expected low harvest.[8] The Ministry of Food (MoF) were also keeping up the pressure on the Burma Office to increase rice production in the colony. Pethick-Lawrence outlined the difficulties they were facing in Burma in a letter to the Minister of Food, Sir Ben Smith.

> … I have to give full weight to the political circumstances, and, on top of that, to consider how to get the cultivator back to the fields and to get rice sown on a scale that will give us the sort of output that we are hoping for from the new harvest.[9]

The 'political circumstances' Pethick-Lawrence spoke of here was the future of Burma within the British Empire, something which had been a thorny issue before the war.

The 1935 Government of Burma Act started Burma on the path towards eventual self-rule. Coming into force in 1937, the Act split Burma from India and established a new legislature of an elected Senate and House of Representatives in the colony. The British Governor was to remain in post and be assisted by a ten-man council which would serve as the Burma Government's executive body. The wartime Japanese occupation of Burma threw British plans into disarray. In the wake of the invasion, the Burma Government fled to India. During his war-time exile, Dorman-Smith formulated a new policy for Burma. In a telegram circulated to the War Cabinet in August 1942, Dorman-Smith invoked the trusteeship interpretation of British imperial rule.

> To wash our hands of Burma seems to me to be out of the question, if we recognise our responsibility to rehabilitate the life of that country which has been destroyed owing to our inability to defend her. The Burmese have neither the ability nor the financial resources to tackle this formidable task unaided.[10]

Confident that Britain would reoccupy Burma, Dorman-Smith believed that the country would require a period of direct British rule after the war to help in its rehabilitation. This policy was all but confirmed in May 1945. The Cabinet India and Burma Committee concluded that, while

[7] 222, Letter from Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 12 November 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[8] 222, Letter from Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 12 November 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[9] 223, Letter from Pethick-Lawrence to Smith, 7 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[10] WP (42) 346, 7 August 1942, CAB 66/27/26, TNA, p.2.

self-rule was still Britain's long-term goal, a period of total British control would be necessary to assist in post-war reconstruction.[11]. A new white paper defined the aims of Britain's Burma policy as working to promote 'all aspects of Burma's administration and economic, social and cultural development.'[12] While British post-war designs for Burma were presented as being in the colony's best interests, London saw them as an opportunity to prolong British rule.

Early estimates of Burmese rice supply following the return of British colonial rule were hardly encouraging. In early December 1945, Dorman-Smith informed Mountbatten that while Burma would be able to meet its commitment to export 100,000 tons of rice by the end of 1945, it could not go beyond this.[13] Prospects for the early months of 1946 were also dire, with the Burma Government stating that they would be incapable of exporting any rice through the first three months based on their current estimates.[14] Back in Whitehall, these developments were raised by the War Office at an ad-hoc Cabinet committee meeting. Despite holding a 500,000-ton surplus of rice, the Burmese Government were only prepared to meet its commitment to export 100,000 tons. The remaining balance of 400,000 would be held back as a safeguard against the possibility of the 1945/46 crop failing. In response, the War Office recommended that continued pressure be applied to Dorman-Smith to release a greater proportion of Burma's surplus rice.[15] Further to this, the Burma Government's reluctance to increase its export risked political difficulties for Britain. Facing criticism from the Americans over their efforts to improve the availability and production of rice in South-East Asia, if news of the Burma Government's apparent hoarding reached Washington, it would add 'embarrassing complications' to an already tense situation.[16]

[11] WP (45) 275, 1 May 1945, CAB 66/65/26, TNA, p.2.
[12] WP (45) 290, 8 May 1945, CAB 66/65/40, TNA, p.8.
[13] 232, Mountbatten to War Office, 11 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, pp.1-2.
[14] 233, Mountbatten to War Office, 11 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[15] 238, Memorandum by the War Office, 15 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.2.
[16] GEN 107/1, 15 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.3.

Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, Deputy Under-Secretary of State for Burma, defended the policy of the Burma Government. Acknowledging the seriousness of the rice shortage, Laithwaite argued that the War Office recommendation was based on an incorrect assumption. While there was a surplus of 500,000 tons of rice in Burma, it was not in the hands of the colonial government. The majority of this amount was still held by local producers who, given the inflated world market value, would be unlikely to part with their crop for a lower-than-average price. The unwillingness of local farmers was not the only issue hampering Burmese rice supply. Laithwaite stressed to the committee that the war had caused more severe damage in Burma 'than in any other part of the Empire'.

> … there was a particular shortage of transport and consumer goods without which exports could not be increased and the lack of which might even endanger the new harvest; and shortage of personnel and destruction of normal distribution centres both made it much more difficult for the Governor to get reliable information as to the amounts of rice probably available and to bring pressure to bear to bring it out.[17]

Laithwaite's comments had little influence on the War Office. With the military still tasked with governing Malaya until civil administration was restored, Major-General A.V. Anderson, Director of Civil Affairs at the War Office, hoped that the Burma Government would take the fact that rice rations in Malaya had been cut by some 50 per cent into account when choosing not to export more rice. While accepting that the war had brought destruction and disruption throughout Burma, Anderson believed that the country should still be capable of maintaining its present export rate – an average of around 20,000 tons a month – into early 1946.[18] The MoF supported the War Office. They argued that the Burma Government had already surpassed its export commitments, having shipped 100,000 tons by the end of 1945 and hoped Burma would be able to export a further 56,000 tons through the first two months of 1946. In the eyes of the MoF, the Burma Government's decision to halt all rice exports into 1946 was 'unduly cautious',

[17] GEN 107/1st Meeting, 18 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.1.
[18] GEN 107/1st Meeting, 18 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.1.

given the size of supposed surplus.[19] Because of the adverse effects that a cessation of Burmese rice exports might have on American political opinion, the Foreign Office argued that a token export rate should be maintained and the MoF suggested a target figure of 50,000 tons through the first quarter of 1946.[20] The committee eventually reached a compromise. Dorman-Smith should propose that Burma maintain a nominal export of rice during January 1946, if only to keep the supply chain moving. Once the yield of the 1945/46 harvest had been accurately established, the Burma Government should be urged to agree further exports through to March 1946 while doing all it could to gain control over both the 400,000-ton reserve and future crop as possible.[21]

These conclusions were telegrammed to Dorman-Smith the following day. The Governor was informed that London felt it 'essential to secure further contribution' from Burma due to the 'very grave' food situation in South-East Asia. Whitehall asked Dorman-Smith to verify the true scale of the alleged 400,000 ton surplus, provide an approximate estimate of the 1945/1946 rice harvest, and confirm, if this upcoming harvest would support Burma's own needs, that the Burma Government were prepared to make a 'substantial' contribution towards the famine relief efforts from the old surplus stock.[22] That same day, Dorman-Smith reported the conditions in Burma back to Whitehall. He told the Burma Office, while they knew that the upcoming harvest was 'somewhere around subsistence level', he could not provide an accurate estimate. Due to the shortage of motorised transport in the country, colonial government officials had not been able to visit the rice growing regions and conduct assessments of the rice yield. Dorman-Smith also argued that the British had misunderstood the 500,000-ton surplus. It was not, in fact, solely intended for export but rather was an emergency reserve held in Lower

[19] GEN 107/1st Meeting, 18 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.2.
[20] GEN 107/1st Meeting, 18 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.2.
[21] GEN 107/1st Meeting, 18 December 1945, CAB 130/8/GEN107, TNA, p.2.
[22] F 735/3/61, Pethick-Lawrence to Dorman-Smith, 19 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.

Burma to protect against food shortages in Upper Burma.[23] Dorman-Smith broke this down further. Of the 500,000 tons, 220,000 had been purchased by the British military Civil Affairs Service. They had distributed 45-50,000 tons of this internally and exported 100,000, keeping hold of 65-70,000 tons. Between 150,000 to 200,000 tons had been sent to Upper Burma and a further 100,000 tons remained in the hands of rice growers in Lower Burma. On their best estimates, therefore, an amount no greater than 200,000 tons of rice remained for export from the assumed surplus of 500,000.[24] Despite recognising that rice exports were crucial to Burma's post-war economic recovery, Dorman-Smith stated that it would be inappropriate to ship a larger amount of Burmese rice out of the country.

> Rumours of impending shortage are already rife and public demand of cessation of exports is growing. In these circumstances, any real, or even fancied shortage would have the most disastrous effect on the minds and actions of an ill-informed public … [25]

Dorman-Smith did not want to undertake any action which risked popular disturbance in Burma and could jeopardise London's plan to gradually transfer self-rule to that colony. If Burmese rice stocks were to play a key part in British regional famine relief policy, to lose control over them could have disastrous consequences for maintaining colonial rule in South-East Asia.

In regard to the future availability of rice in Burma, Dorman-Smith estimated a provisional yield of over two million tons of rice from the upcoming 1945/46 harvest. Despite this figure, he remained uncertain as to whether it would allow a normal level of rice consumption to be maintained in Burma. Dorman-Smith endorsed the decision of the Burma Government to halt rice exports into 1946, informing London that they would not commit 'to any substantial export' of the old crop until they could be sure of the real amount available for their domestic use. He did offer some hope though. Considering 'the desperate situation' in Malaya, he told London that he was prepared to propose to the Executive Council that Burma

[23] Burma's main rice growing regions lie in the south of the country around the Irrawaddy delta. The northern Karen and Shan states consist of steep hills and mountains and are not suitable for intensive rice growing.
[24] F 735/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 19 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.
[25] F 735/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 19 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, pp.1-2.

'take risk' of increasing their previously agreed export figure from 100,000 tons to 120,000 tons of rice. This extra 20,000 tons would hopefully be shipped by the end of January 1946, he said. Further shipments throughout the first quarter of 1946 would remain dependent on rice production exceeding internal requirements.[26]

The results of the Executive Council meeting were communicated back to London five days later. While 'sympathetic to Malaya's plight and anxious to help', the Executive Council viewed this as an opportunity to advance their own claims on Britain for further support in the rehabilitation of their country.[27] The Burma Government felt that they had been neglected by London in terms of post-war aid and assistance. This grievance was heightened by the extensive concessions that Britain had offered Siam, a wartime enemy, to encourage rice production there. Dorman-Smith commented:

> I am sure that His Majesty's Government will, on consideration, take the larger view that the satisfactory restoration of world's rice supply demands more on Burma's production during the next two or three years than on Siam's temporary surplus of old rice.[28]

The Executive Council approved Dorman-Smith's proposal to ship the extra 20,000 tons of rice to Malaya in January 1946. Dorman-Smith added, however, that the Executive Council only agreed to do this 'because of the vital importance to us of securing every possible assistance in obtaining consumer goods and transport' from Britain, and they were therefore 'confident that their willingness to take this risk will help us obtain every possible assistance from London in this matter'. It was now up to London to provide Burma with the goods and transport they desired in return for rice as Dorman-Smith exhorted the British to do their 'utmost to ensure that this confidence is not misplaced.'[29]

Despite securing the agreement of the Burma Government to ship more rice to Malaya, London still pressured the colony to release an even greater amount. Sir Ben Smith, Minister

[26] 277, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 23 December 1945, CO 852/568/13, TNA, p.1.
[27] F 735/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 28 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.
[28] F 735/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 28 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.
[29] F 735/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 28 December 1945, FO 371/53838, TNA, p.1.

of Food, telegrammed Dorman-Smith directly in January to press for this increase. With the 1945/46 harvest underway and Burma itself unlikely to face food shortages for a significant period yet, Smith asked the Governor if he would permit an export of 400,000 tons of rice during the first quarter of 1946. Smith again accused the Burma Government of over-caution, stating that their determination to hold onto a surplus of rice in case of food shortage was 'an insurance against a contingency which may not arise.'[30] To make them more likely to part with this surplus, Smith suggested a somewhat bizarre scheme in which Burma could make a claim for a refund on exported rice from other South-East Asian sources should it face a deficiency of its own. From 1 July 1946, they would be able to claim the total amount needed to make good on their shortage, against any rice exports they had made throughout the first six months of the year.

These terms were rejected by Dorman-Smith, and his response was circulated to the Cabinet by Pethick-Lawrence. Dorman-Smith was prepared to offer a further 65,000 tons of rice for export in the first quarter of 1946, although this was the limit of Burma's capacity. Dorman-Smith questioned the wisdom of the MoF proposal.

> Is it thought that we have unlimited stocks of rice or that we can move what we have at will? Burma has never had storage capacity on a large scale (…) and our position has certainly not been improved by years of war and military occupation … Our milled stocks on January 15 were 120,000 tons. During the remaining 75 days to end of March we get a possible 150,000 tons which could be milled for export. The arithmetic is simple. We have not got 400,000 tons.[31]

Even if they were in possession of this amount of rice, Dorman-Smith argued that Burmese infrastructure was in no fit state to support such a massive increase. Burma's railway network was 'only working very shakily' and the majority of inland shipping had been destroyed by Allied bombing. Dorman-Smith blamed the United States in particular for the destruction of Burmese river shipping, commenting that the Americans appeared to have 'forgotten that they

[30] CP (46) 28, 29 January 1946, CAB 129/6/28, p.3.
[31] Appendix to CP (46) 33, 30 January 1946, CAB 129/6/33, TNA, p.1.

have themselves been bombing and machine gunning our country craft for years in spite of our misgivings.'[32] The scheme by which Burma could claim a refund on rice exports in the event of food shortages there was rightly derided by the Governor. The most likely source of this refunded rice was from Siam. According to Dorman-Smith, Siamese rice was unsuitable for local consumption in Burma. Given that Siamese rice supplies had accumulated over the course of the war years, rather than from recent harvests, Dorman-Smith doubted that the rice would even be in a suitable condition for consumption, arguing that Burma would 'probably be getting bad rice for good' if they agreed to the MoF proposals as they stood.[33] Pethick-Lawrence used his Governor's telegram as evidence of Burma's need for more aid from London. He asked the Cabinet not to force the Burma Government into meeting the MoF demand for a 400,000-ton delivery of rice by March 1946. To help meet the 65,000-ton offer, Pethick-Lawrence implored his colleagues to do 'everything possible' to help with Burma's need for road and river transport and consumer goods to facilitate a larger export of rice.[34] Despite the evidence provided by both Dorman-Smith and Pethick-Lawrence, the Cabinet agreed, in principle with the MoF. The Burma Government must be pressed to improve their offer, they concluded, and in the present circumstances of a global rice shortage London could give no guarantee of replacement rice to Burma in the event of a local deficiency there.[35]

Upon his arrival in South-East Asia, Lord Killearn made a personal visit to Dorman-Smith to properly understand the situation there. Killearn was heavily critical of what he found in Rangoon. He told the Foreign Office that he felt Dorman-Smith needed more support to improve rice exports from Burma. Killearn took specific aim at the Treasury which was pushing for a reduction in the size of the Burmese civil service as a cost-cutting exercise, describing this as 'an extremely short-sighted policy at [a] moment when the crying need for purposes of

[32] Appendix to CP (46) 33, 30 January 1946, CAB 129/6/33, TNA, p.1.
[33] Appendix to CP (46) 33, 30 January 1946, CAB 129/6/33, TNA, p.3.
[34] CP (46) 33, 30 January 1946, CAB 129/6/33, TNA, p.1.
[35] CM (46) 10th Conclusions, 31 January 1946, CAB 128/5/10, TNA, p.74.

maximum rice extraction is re-establishment of administration'.[36] In London, both Sargent and Sterndale Bennett were wary of the possible damage Killearn's report could do. Sterndale Bennett stated that, while Killearn's observations were 'those of a casual visitor only …the picture painted is pretty grim.' If these became known in Whitehall, Sterndale Bennett feared that this would be seen as concrete evidence of a Foreign Office plan to assert their control over British affairs in South-East Asia.[37] Sargent too expressed this fear that it could escalate interdepartmental tensions.

> In the execution of his mission, Lord Killearn is bound to report on cases of this kind … it is very embarrassing for the Foreign Office to have to handle these complaints, as they are primarily questions affecting the India Office and it will only cause suspicion and ill-will if the India Office and Colonial Office are given reason to think we are poaching on their preserves.[38]

Despite these fears, the Foreign Office concluded that Killearn's views could not go ignored. The Foreign Office felt that they were best placed to manage the relief policy. After all, the Special Commission had been established for this purpose, co-ordinating British policy throughout the region. Indeed, the Foreign Office seemed to recognise just how closely interlinked the politics and economics of individual South-East Asian territories were. They were prepared to involve themselves further in the internal politics of Britain's colonies in South-East Asia to ensure that famine relief was a success, even if it risked interdepartmental conflict in Whitehall. To minimise this possibility, Sargent tactfully recommended that Bevin raise the matter directly with the Prime Minister.[39] Bevin relayed Killearn's concerns to Attlee the following day, adding that, in his view, the Treasury was far more interested in self-preservation rather than tackling the rice famine, willing to 'sacrifice the Empire for their dignity', as he put it. British famine relief policy 'must be made to work', Bevin said, and the situation in Burma had him 'gravely worried' about this prospect.[40] An inefficient government

[36] F 3966/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 16 March 1946, FO 371/53846, TNA, p.1.
[37] F 5693/3/61, Minute by Sterndale Bennett, 18 March 1946, FO 371/53859, TNA.
[38] F 5693/3/61, Minute by Sargent, 19 March 1946, FO 371/53859. TNA.
[39] F 5693/3/61, Minute by Sargent, 19 March 1946, FO 371/53859. TNA.
[40] FE 46/50, Letter from Bevin to Attlee, 20 March 1946, FO 800/461, TNA, pp.1-2.

in Burma might jeopardise British famine relief policy and, by extension, the future of Britain's imperial presence in South-East Asia.

In mid-March 1946, Laithwaite circulated a memorandum to the Cabinet South-East Asia Food Supply (SEAF) Committee which outlined the status of production in the country. Laithwaite informed the committee that while the Burma Government hoped to bring an extra two million acres under cultivation, rice acreage in the country would only total 8.5 million acres, down from the pre-war figure of thirteen million. Outside of Arakan Province and the Irrawaddy delta, the two largest rice growing regions, Burma was facing an internal deficit of around 500,000 tons of rice.[41] Despite these domestic shortages, the Burma Government were still willing to contribute to Britain's regional famine relief effort. In response to Lord Killearn's early April warning that starvation conditions were a real possibility in Malaya and Singapore, the Executive Council accepted a proposal from Dorman-Smith to release more rice for export, having been 'greatly impressed with the immediate and desperate need of South-East Asia'. It was agreed that Burma could immediately provide 40,000 tons of milled rice from the stock previously purchased by the British military Civil Affairs Service. On top of this, a further 50,000 tons of unmilled or parboiled rice plus any surplus from Arakan that was not required to meet domestic needs would be purchased by the Burma Government for export.[42] The Executive Council attached a caveat to their offer. They wanted London to reaffirm its commitment that, if Burma faced its own shortages, they would be guaranteed a claim on the expected Siamese surplus, as they had been promised by the MoF in January. The Council also requested that this plan be kept secret.[43] Should the populace find out that the colonial government were planning to export rice when areas of Burma itself were faced with the risk of starvation, it might lead to civil disturbances. Quite possibly, British rule would be

[41] SEAF (46) 36, Burmese Rice, 19 March 1946, CAB 134/678, TNA, pp.1-2.
[42] F 5454/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 7 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1.
[43] F 5454/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Pethick-Lawrence, 7 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.2.

overthrown at a much sooner date than the timetable towards independence devised by London had accounted for. Pethick-Lawrence told his governor that London very much appreciated this offer and requested that, should more rice become available in Burma, Dorman-Smith would make further contributions during the upcoming quarter.[44]

The restoration of Burma's rice export industry would not only provide much-needed foodstuffs for the whole region, but it would also help Burma with its own post-war economic recovery. Speaking at Killearn's preliminary food conferences in late March 1946, representatives from Burma emphasised this point. Bernard Binns, an agricultural adviser to the Government of Burma, informed the conference that the export of rice was 'vital' and that Burma 'lived on its exports … [and] by far the most important of these was rice.' Given the domestic economic needs of Burma, it would have made little sense for the colonial government to deliberately withhold surplus rice. Binns stated that it was the defined policy of the Burma Government to export rice to 'the maximum possible degree.'[45] But in order to achieve this, the Burmese needed support from London. As Binns reported:

> Nearly all the towns were in ruins. The communications were completely disrupted … The situation in respect of law and order was appalling … Large armed bands of 200-300 robbers roamed the countryside. The police were severely handicapped by a lack of transport … The farmers were completely discouraged after four years during which they had grown rice nobody had bought. Owing to the cessation of imports and the dislocation of communications, especially between Upper and Lower Burma, they were unable to buy the things they needed.[46]

Binns gave the conference a summary of the aid Burma had received from Britain so far. Of the seventy-six million square yards of textiles allotted for the first six months of 1946, Burma had received only nineteen million. Of the sixty-two million square yards ordered for the second half of the year, none had been received. With the rainy season imminent, the need for textiles was even more pressing as they were required to produce enough clothing for rice cultivators,

[44] F 5454/3/61, Pethick-Lawrence to Dorman-Smith, 16 April 1946, FO 371/53856, TNA, p.1
[45] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA. p.6.
[46] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA. p.6

who the Burma Government estimated would need up to two changes of clothes per day to keep farming during the wet weather.[47] With regard to agricultural tools and machinery, the situation was more positive and there were enough cattle in the country to plough the present rice acreage under cultivation. It was only in terms of the availability of internal shipping and transport to move rice around the country that Burma was still experiencing a shortage.

Despite previous comments that the country had enough plough cattle to maintain the present acreage of rice paddy under cultivation, the British were determined to restore the Burmese rice industry to its pre-war scale. To do this, more cattle would be required. In mid-March 1946, Killearn asked London if there was any possibility of acquiring cattle from India or Siam. He also discussed this matter with Dorman-Smith. Dorman-Smith said that Burma's need for cattle could be met through existing livestock in the country, moving animals from farmland in Upper Burma to the rice growing areas in Lower Burma. He suggested to Killearn that if the British government made available to Burma a supply of light tractors these could be sent to Upper Burma as a replacement for the south-bound cattle.[48] Pethick-Lawrence wrote to his governor three days later, stating that Britain was 'most anxious' to help Burma over this issue. Pethick-Lawrence had already sought advice as to the feasibility of using tractors in Burma. While the Burma Office were advised that tractors would be unsuitable for rice farming, Pethick-Lawrence agreed with Dorman-Smith's suggestion that they could be used as a substitute for cattle in Upper Burma thus freeing up livestock to be transferred to the south. Pethick-Lawrence stressed that there would be delays in shipping tractors from Britain, with it being 'most unlikely' that any would arrive in time for the spring sowing season from mid-May to mid-June.[49] External factors, however, ensured that this enforced internal movement of cattle was the only possible method of providing the necessary aid to restore Burma's rice industry.

[47] F 5606/3/61, Conference on Food; Minutes, 26 March 1946, FO 371/53857, TNA. pp.13-14.
[48] F 7219/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 16 March 1946. FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.
[49] F 7219/3/61, Pethick-Lawrence to Dorman-Smith, 19 March 1946. FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.

In late March, the Foreign Office received notification from Geoffrey Thompson, the British Ambassador to Siam, that there was no possibility of that country providing plough cattle for Burma. Numbers in that country had been significantly diminished by Japanese exploitation during the war and outbreaks of disease.[50] With this in mind, the matter was left with Dorman-Smith. The Burma Office requested that he communicate to London the number of tractors required to enable the planned transfer of cattle.

Levels of bureaucracy significantly slowed the process. At Killearn's April Food Conference, a sub-committee set up to investigate methods for increasing food production and collection in South-East Asia (and chaired by Dorman-Smith himself) concluded that further expert opinion was required on the practical use of tractors in the region. The committee agreed to recommend that Killearn invite experts from manufacturers to advise local administrations on the use of their machinery.[51] Ministers and officials within the Burma Office were sceptical about this plan. Pethick-Lawrence wrote to Dorman-Smith to suggest that the visit of manufacturers' experts be postponed until the Burma Government itself had a better idea of its own requirements. There was 'little prospect' of acquiring 1,000 tractors, as specified in Burma's Young Working Party (YWP) relief programme, from Britain, and time was running short to have any machinery shipped and Burmese farmers trained in their use ready to begin ploughing for the 1947 crop.[52] Laithwaite too believed that such a visit at this stage would only add to British difficulties, producing 'too many cooks'.[53] Since the end of the Japanese occupation, Burma had been receiving shipments of agricultural implements from Britain as part of the YWP requirements, totalling some 200,000 hoes and a similar number of cattle-drawn ploughs.[54] Since significant progress had been made in delivering these products to

[50] F 7219/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 27 March 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.
[51] F 6608/3/61, April Conference on Food; Committee No.1 – Minutes, 16 April 1946. FO 371/53865, TNA, p.3.
[52] F 6369/3/61, Pethick-Lawrence to Dorman-Smith, 21 May 1946, FO 371/53863, TNA, p.1.
[53] F 6369/3/61, Letter from Laithwaite to EA Armstrong, 22 May 1946, FO 371/53863, TNA, p.1.
[54] Far East Relief Requirements – Report of Young Working Party, BT 25/75/SLAMISC6, TNA, p.51.

Burma, the SEAF Committee concluded that there was no immediate need for these expert visits to take place. While the British had hoped that mechanising Burma's rice industry would increase productivity during this time of great need, any disruption would be disastrous.

Burmese rice output, however, did fall short in the second quarter of 1946. When Killearn asked Dorman-Smith to provide a weekly update on the internal food situation, he stated that the new crop had not reached anticipated levels. While local food shortages may have occurred due to an uneven internal distribution of supplies, Dorman-Smith did not expect starvation levels to be reached in Burma, confidently predicting there was 'no danger of food riots' in the upcoming quarter and hence no further dislocation of Burma's rice export programme. Dorman-Smith expressed his displeasure at the Special Commissioner's request for weekly updates, seeing it as further evidence of Foreign Office interference, and he told Killearn that he would update him only in the event of 'any signs of unusual development' in Burma's food situation.[55] Both Killearn and the Foreign Office were in agreement that these updates were crucially important to managing British famine relief policy, especially during this period of acute rice shortage and they urged Dorman-Smith to maintain weekly communication. While recognising that his request might be 'a nuisance' to the 'harassed and understaffed administrations' in Burma, Malaya and Singapore, Killearn would 'not be fobbed off' in his attempt to orchestrate a regional, British-led, famine relief policy.[56]

Although clearly concerned with what he felt was unwarranted intrusion on behalf of Foreign Office agents into Burmese affairs, Dorman-Smith announced in mid-May that the Executive Council had agreed to make a further 100,000 tons of old rice stock available for export from Burma though the period May-July 1946.[57] This would go some way to alleviating the difficulties Britain was still experiencing in procuring rice from Siam. Killearn expressed

[55] F 6505/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Killearn, 8 May 1946, FO 371/53864, TNA, p.1
[56] F 7444/3/61, Minute by Moss, 20 May 1946, FO 371/53870, TNA.
[57] F 7419/3/61, Dorman-Smith to Killearn, 16 May 1946, FO 371/53870, TNA, p.1.

his thanks to the Government of Burma, referring to the extra rice as 'manna from heaven'.[58] There is no doubt that Dorman-Smith and the Government of Burma viewed the food crisis engulfing South-East Asia as an opportunity to extract further aid from London. Britain's willingness to provide Burma with material assistance, such as textiles and vehicles to rehabilitate the country's internal transport network, were evidence of this. It should, however, be borne in mind that these were not offered to Burma purely as an act of altruism. It was intended that this aid would hasten the restoration of Burma's rice industry, enabling that colony to make further contributions to Britain's regional famine relief effort.

Aung San and the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League

It is worth here contextualising the arguments between Dorman-Smith and Whitehall about further metropolitan assistance to rehabilitate Burma's rice industry against Britain's long-term policy for the colony, the eventual transition to self-governance. As elsewhere in South-East Asia, Britain had to contend with local nationalist movements in Burma. Aung San and his Burmese National Army (BNA) had fought with the Japanese against the British from 1942. In 1944, the BNA allied themselves with the communists and formed the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). Supported by the British, the AFPFL undertook clandestine operations against the Japanese occupiers to assist in liberating the country. The position of Aung San in Burma caused a dilemma in British policy-making. Some saw him as a unifying force in the country who appeared a suitable candidate to transfer power to when self-government was eventually granted. Others saw him as an opportunist (as demonstrated by his wartime change of allegiance) who sought to undermine British rule and seize power for himself. In October 1945, Pethick-Lawrence informed his Cabinet colleagues that they would be making 'a great mistake' if they accepted Aung San and the AFPFL as 'the voice of Burma and as adequately representing all political opinion in that country.'[59] When Dorman-Smith

[58] F 7419/3/61, Killearn to Dorman-Smith, 17 May 1946, FO 371/53870, TNA, p.1.
[59] CP (45) 258, 29 October 1945, CAB 129/4/8, TNA, p.2.

came to nominate the first Executive Council in November 1945, he would include no members from the AFPFL. Instead, he chose a majority of Burmese colonial officials who had worked with his wartime government-in-exile and three representatives from more moderate nationalist groups.[60]

During the war, Mountbatten had come to view Aung San and the AFPFL as the faction most likely to form a stable government once the conflict had ended. Yet Dorman-Smith had quite different ideas and the repercussions of his attempts to sideline the AFPFL after his return to the governorship came to a head in the first six months of 1946. The previous November, Dorman-Smith had received information implicating Aung San in the wartime killing of a village chief during his collaboration with the Japanese. The issue arose again in late February 1946 when Thakin Tun Oke, a political opponent of Aung San and Minister of Planning on Dorman-Smith's Executive Council, accused Aung San of the murder in a speech to the Legislative Council, the lower house of the Burma Government. Dorman-Smith decided to act, telegramming Clement Attlee that he was proposing to arrest Aung San.[61] With Pethick-Lawrence in India as a member of the Cabinet mission sent to negotiate that colony's independence, the Prime Minister had assumed personal control over the India and Burma Office during the Secretary of State's absence from London. The Cabinet India and Burma Committee discussed the possibility of detaining Aung San and ultimately agreed to inform Dorman-Smith that more conclusive evidence of his crimes would be required than the words of Thakin Tun Oke. Tun Oke's past was hardly clean and had also collaborated with the Japanese in the initial stages of the invasion. In his wartime recollections Tun Oke admitted to ordering the beheading of three British prisoners-of-war and having their heads displayed on bamboo stakes. The question of Tun Oke's suitability for a ministerial position in Dorman-

[60] For a brief narrative of Dorman-Smith's selection process, see R.B. Smith, 'Some Contrasts between Burma and Malaya in British Policy towards South-East Asia, 1942-1946' in Smith and A.J. Stockwell (eds.), *British Policy and the Transfer of Power in Asia: Documentary Perspectives*, (London: SOAS, 1987), pp.54-58.
[61] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1,* p.694.

Smith's government was even raised in the House of Commons where Arthur Henderson, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for India and Burma, answered that it was a decision best left to the discretion of the Governor.[62]

Mountbatten himself also intervened in the case. Despite no longer holding any political authority over Burma, he wrote to Dorman-Smith in defence of Aung San.

> The incident in question is now four years old and I should have thought our best policy would have been to forget incidents of this sort on which there are conflicting opinions … [Aung San] is bound to be a leading figure for some years to come … I consider the arrest of Aung San at the present time the greatest disservice which could be done towards the future relationship of Burma within the British Empire.[63]

The day after Mountbatten's telegram to the Governor, an emergency meeting of civil and military officials of the Burma Government was held in Rangoon to discuss the possible fallout of Aung San's arrest. Major-General Harold Briggs, Commander-in-Chief Burma Command and future planner of British counter-insurgency strategy in Malaya, gave the military appreciation of the situation, concluding that 'disturbances are probable … economic reconstruction and the provision of rice to counter world famine would be seriously interfered with.' In the event of such disturbances, the military reminded the meeting that the Government of Burma would be unable to call on Indian troops to pacify any outbreaks of violence and hence policy 'must be directed at avoiding such a rebellion.' In fact, Briggs asked the meeting for further clarity as to the ultimate objective of British policy in Burma.

> Is the primary object:
> a) Reconstruction of Burma economically, and combined with this
> b) provision of increased output of rice to help meet the world shortage?
> Or is it:
> c) to prepare the country politically for self-government?

If Britain were seeking to achieve the first two interconnected objectives, Briggs informed the meeting that, in the opinion of the military authorities, arresting Aung San would be 'a mistake.'[64]

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[62] House of Commons Debate, 11 March 1946, Vol.420, cc.740-741.
[63] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.698.
[64] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.706.

The charges against Aung San refused to disappear and set in motion an extended argument between Whitehall and Dorman-Smith. In early April, the widow of the murdered chief petitioned Dorman-Smith directly for Aung San's arrest, providing the governor with her testimony as witness to the alleged crime. Dorman-Smith decided that this was enough evidence to justify detaining Aung San, telegramming Pethick-Lawrence with the comment that they now 'must let law take its course.' In a strange reversal of what the military authorities feared, Dorman-Smith argued that the failure to arrest Aung San in response to what was now a very public accusation of murder might itself lead to a state of anarchy in Burma. Aung San's arrest was not a case of political persecution but rather a 'purely criminal' matter.[65] London, however, was still urging caution. Henderson asked Dorman-Smith to delay investigations into Aung San for two to three months, but he said he could not because this was about his government being able to display that it was still in control and he expected Aung-San to be arrested by the end of April.

Dorman-Smith wrote to Attlee on 3 May, suggesting that the British Government grant him permission to reconstitute his Executive Council and offer seats to other known proponents of Burmese independence such as U Saw, the pre-war Prime Minister of Burma who had spent the duration of the conflict in detention in British Uganda due to his attempts to secretly elicit Japanese collaboration prior to the invasion in 1941, Thakin Tun Oke, and also more moderate Burmese nationalists. Dorman-Smith hoped that by drawing on the support of figures from across the political spectrum, it might persuade the AFPFL to accept seats on his Executive Council and hence make the council more representative of the state of Burmese politics. As before, however, there was no room for Aung San himself.

> It may seem odd to you that the I have formed the view that the two men I really wish to anchor to my side, Saw and Oke, are men with very doubtful pasts … Only alternative which I can see, is the bleak one of ruling Burma with a rod of iron … I think we have a chance to save the situation here. If my hands are tied too much, then I am sure we must prepare ourselves for the consequences in the trouble and resign ourselves to the probability

[65] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1,* p.732.

> that, for far from increasing food supplies, we may well have a decreased acreage. I have no desire to be party to such a policy.[66]

The situation in Burma was evolving rapidly. Dorman-Smith wrote to Attlee again on 6 May to inform the Prime Minister that Aung San would now accept, if invited, an offer to the AFPFL to take up seats on the Executive Council on the condition that Saw was not appointed leader. Dorman-Smith told the Prime Minister that this was 'a most tantalising situation' offering the opportunity to simultaneously unite the nationalist elements and isolate the communists in Burma. He proposed to convene a meeting of principal political leaders including Saw and Aung San. Invitations to this meeting would be based 'on the paramount necessity of Burma fulfilling her role as important potential food supplier.' Obtaining the opinions of the Burmese politicians on the export of that country's rice would be a measure of how close the different factions were to genuine agreement and hence also the effectiveness of the new Executive Council. Dorman-Smith's telegram struck a self-congratulatory tone as he described the situation as 'vindication of policy which I had adopted.'[67] Attlee appeared unconvinced by his arguments. If anything, he said, this displayed that the British were no longer in control of the situation and that policy was being dictated by the actions of the Burmese. Writing to Pethick-Lawrence, Attlee told the Secretary of State that it was 'obvious' that Dorman-Smith 'has lost grip. He changes his position from day to day and has no clear policy. I am convinced he must be replaced.'[68] On 15 May, Attlee telegrammed Dorman-Smith requesting his presence in London under the premise that in-person discussions would lead to a clearer understanding of the situation in Burma. Suffering with amoebic dysentery, Dorman-Smith told the Prime Minister that he could not return immediately. This presented Attlee with the perfect opportunity to speed up his replacement. Attlee informed Pethick-Lawrence that he could not risk leaving as 'important and difficult charge' as Burma 'in the hands of a sick man' and

[66] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.764.
[67] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.770.
[68] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.773.

appointed Sir Henry Knight, an experienced official from the Indian Civil Service, as acting governor.[69] Still convalescing, Dorman-Smith left Burma for London by sea on 15 June, arriving back in Britain on 14 July. Following two weeks of talks with the Government, it was announced (perhaps conveniently) that Dorman-Smith was resigning on medical advice and it was implied that a return to a tropical climate such as Burma may cause another bout of severe illness.[70]

For Dorman-Smith's permanent replacement as Governor, Attlee opted for Major-General Sir Hubert Rance, the former Chief Civil Affairs Officer in the British military government which administered Burma in the immediate period after liberation. Rance had been recommended to the Prime Minister by Mountbatten, with both men seeing continued co-operation with Aung San and the AFPFL as key to restoring order in the colony as a prerequisite of its eventual transition to self-governance as a dominion within the Commonwealth.[71] Arriving in Rangoon in early August, Rance's first four months in Burma as Governor were marked by continued internal strife. Dorman-Smith's administration had failed to get on top of banditry which was disrupting the rice industry. Rance was sworn in as Governor on 31 August and, in one of his first speeches, said that prosperity could only return to Burma if export of its profitable natural products, such as rice and timber, were expanded. If this were achieved, Burmese citizens would not only 'be freed from fear of hunger and destitution' but the increase of exports would in turn facilitate the import of luxury goods and other consumer products and help to reduce the cost of living in the colony. Failure to tackle the bandits would undermine this effort to rebuild.[72]

While Burma's rice yield was improving, the British still wanted a greater proportion to be exported to Malaya and Singapore. In an attempt to get control over the internal rice situation,

[69] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1,* p.821.
[70] *The Times*, 5 August 1946, p.4.
[71] P. Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography*, (London: Collins, 1985), p.321.
[72] *The Times*, 3 September 1946, p.3.

Rance opted for a two-pronged policy of the compulsory declaration of paddy and rice stocks by farmers and millers and the government requisitioning of supplies. As Rance put it:

> This decision has been rendered urgent by local anxiety as to sufficiency of rice supplies which is manifesting itself in such undesirable ways as picketting of mills and forcible prevention of movements of rice and even in a few cases in actual seizure of cargoes and looting of mills.[73]

And while Rance's administration was attempting to tighten its grip over Burmese rice supplies, elsewhere in Burma it was losing control. Soon after Rance's arrival in Rangoon, the city's police force began a strike, demanding increased wages to cope with the rising cost of living. This unrest spread, resulting in a general strike. Beginning on 24 September, some 20,000 workers, including those employed on the railways and in the docks, walked out.[74] Killearn wrote back to London expressing his fear that the strikes in Burma had jeopardised Britain's system of allocation and distribution of rice in all South-East Asia.

> General strike in Burma and consequent possibility of dislocation of Burmese procurement and shipment increased our grave anxieties … Unless something approaching the expected availabilities of 100,000 tons from Burma materialises in 4th quarter it is difficult to see how the deficit territories of South-East Asia are to maintain even their present exiguous rations much less increase them.[75]

The British had reason to suspect that the AFPFL were behind the strike. Aung San had recently delivered an address at a meeting of the AFPFL Supreme Council in which he called for the League to form an interim government, under which there would be elections 'for a free and independent Burma.'[76] The strike and increasingly vocal calls from the AFPFL for Burmese independence prompted Rance into action. In an attempt at moderation, Rance forced the Executive Council he had inherited from Knight to resign. In their place, he chose six members of the AFPFL to be on the eleven-man council. This group included Aung San, who Rance appointed to the role of Deputy Chairman, effectively making him the second most powerful figure in Burma after the Governor himself.

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[73] Rance to Killearn, 18 September 1946, IOR M/4/759, British Library, p.1.
[74] *The Straits Times*, 24 September 1946, p.1.
[75] F 14124/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 26 September 1946, FO 371/53920, TNA, p.1.
[76] Tinker, *Struggle for Independence Vol.1*, p.964.

Handing Aung San and the AFPFL a degree of responsibility in Burma had mixed results. On the one hand, they were able to reach an agreement with the All-Burma Trade Union Congress to call off the general strike. A second strike of dock, timber and oil labourers in and around Rangoon on 13 October also failed to gain any traction. The AFPFL refused to give their support to the strikers and most were back at work within 10 days of the action being called.[77] As Tarling has pointed out, however, rather than moderate their demands for independence, it only strengthened them.[78] The AFPFL-dominated Executive Council announced to Rance that they intended to follow a policy along the lines which Aung San had advocated in his recent address to the League's Supreme Council. They planned to form a National Government and negotiate with London that the results from the general election scheduled for April 1947 (the first held in Burma since it was split from India in 1936) be used to form a new Constituent Assembly to decide on Burma's future constitution, all contributing to the eventual establishment of an independent and sovereign Burmese state. While the 1945 White Paper had not set a timetable for self-rule in Burma, it was apparent that Aung San did not intend to wait. The Executive Council had planned to form a National Government by the end of January 1947 and demanded that Britain transfer power to Burma within twelve months of that date.

London's response seeking a compromise with the AFPFL to maintain good relations with Burma was significantly influenced by the issue of regional rice supplies. Laithwaite commented that they must avoid a situation in which Britain tried to hold onto Burma by force, the effect of which might be that Burmese rice supplies for South-East Asia would 'dry up or greatly diminish.'[79] Rather than send a Cabinet mission to Rangoon, it was agreed that a delegation from the Executive Council should instead be invited to London for face-to-face

[77] *The Straits Times*, 4 October 1946, p.1; *Morning Tribune*, 23 October 1946, p.12.
[78] Tarling, *Britain, South-East Asia and the Onset of the Cold War*, pp.140-142.
[79] Tarling, *Britain, South-East Asia and the Onset of the Cold War*, p.143.

negotiations with the British Government in January 1947.[80] The Cabinet prepared a strategy for dealing with the Burmese delegation upon their arrival in London. Acting on advice received from both Rance and the Chiefs of Staff, Attlee told the Cabinet that Aung San and the AFPFL 'command great influence throughout the country …[and] if their leaders left the Executive Council the administration of the country would be paralysed … it would be impossible to maintain Government without the use of force.' Britain did not have the military manpower available to even attempt this and Attlee commented that the use of force 'would probably serve only to strengthen national feeling in Burma and to increase the influence of those who advocated early secession from the British Commonwealth.'[81] John Strachey, Minister of Food, again stressed the importance of maintaining order and good relations with Burma, telling his Cabinet colleagues that he

> was counting on Burma to export 1½ million tons of rice during the next season. If there were to be widespread civil disturbances this would not be available and the consequences, directly for South-East Asia and indirectly for the whole world cereals situation would be most serious.[82]

The Cabinet ultimately agreed that there was then good reason for negotiating with Aung San and the AFPFL. Firstly, such negotiations would be a display that Britain was sincere in its long-professed objective of assisting Burma in gaining self-government. Secondly, securing the position of the AFPFL as the main political authority in Burma would likely stop the colony from again descending into disorder, as experienced earlier in the year, and maintain Burmese rice exports, crucial for British famine relief policy in South-East Asia to be successful.

As a result of Cabinet discussions, Attlee, in consultation with Pethick-Lawrence and Sir Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade, drafted a statement to be made the following day in the House of Commons. Here, the Prime Minister announced that the Government had invited a Burmese delegation to London to discuss the transition to self-government. Attlee

[80] CM (46) 103rd Conclusions, 5 December 1946, CAB 128/6/41, TNA, p.181.
[81] CM (46) 107th Conclusions, 19 December 1946, CAB 128/6/45, TNA, p.211.
[82] CM (46) 107th Conclusions, 19 December 1946, CAB 128/6/45, TNA, p.212.

spoke of a need to 'hasten forward the time when Burma shall realise her independence, either within or without the Commonwealth' but also of an 'anxiety … to help the people of Burma' towards becoming an independent state.[83] In the ensuing debate, Churchill accused the Attlee administration of abandoning Burma before it was even capable of self-governance.

> This haste is appalling. "Scuttle" is the only word that can be applied. What, spread over a number of years, would be a healthy and constitutional process and might easily have given the Burmese people an opportunity of continuing their association with our congregation of nations, has been cast aside.[84]

The Prime Minister responded that the speed of developments in Burma called for the radical action that his government were undertaking. As Attlee put it, Britain could not

> put the clock back in this case. There is a necessary advance in public opinion, and it is much more dangerous to lag behind … in these matters this country had not been too fast but too slow … The declaration we have made is not one in which we say to Burma, "Go out of the British Empire." On the contrary, we believe they will stay in. We invite them to stay in, but we say that we do not compel people to stay in and I believe that is the right attitude.[85]

Attlee told the House that the Government had no choice but to invite the Burmese delegation to London that coming January. Due to the fixed date of April 1947 for elections in Burma, now was the only opportunity to hold meaningful discussions with them.

Burmese Independence

In early January 1947, Aung San left Burma for London to begin negotiations with the British Government. Travelling ahead of the rest of the Burmese party, he stopped in Delhi for discussions with Indian nationalist leaders. While there he held a press conference at which he outlined his stance on the forthcoming talks. Aung San told reporters that he was heading to London with the intention of gaining 'complete independence' from Britain, adding that there was 'no question of dominion status for Burma.'[86] Negotiations between Britain and Burma

[83] House of Commons Debate, 20 December 1946, vol.431, cc.2341-2343.
[84] House of Commons Debate, 20 December 1946, vol.431, c.2350.
[85] House of Commons Debate, 20 December 1946, vol.431, cc.2352-2353.
[86] *The Times*, 6 January 1947, p.3.

began on 13 January, and it was evident that there were significant differences between the two sides.

During discussions, Dening, now chair of the SEAF committee, prepared a brief for Bevin summarising the food situation in South-East Asia. With regard to Burma and the ongoing discussions over independence, Dening informed the Foreign Secretary that

> there is prospects of trouble from the Communists even before the Burma Delegation gets back. But if the delegation goes back unsatisfied there is almost a certainty of widespread disorders. These will interrupt if they do not stop the export of rice … The conclusion to be derived from all this seems to be that, from the point of view of food supplies, we cannot afford a breakdown in the Burma negotiations. A breakdown in the supply of rice would have the most serious consequences throughout South-East Asia and even further afield.[87]

Sargent, Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, suggested that Dening was overplaying the situation. Britain's short-term need for rice for Malaya and Singapore should not come at the expense of a long-term policy for future relations with Burma.[88] Despite Sargent's critique and the fact that he was playing no significant part in the Anglo-Burmese discussions, Bevin nevertheless felt that Dening's comments were worthy of the Prime Minister's attention as he forwarded the memorandum to Attlee.[89]

Aung San undeniably played on the British fears of communist inspired unrest in Burma and the possible disruption to regional rice supplies such disorder presented in order achieve favourable terms in the independence negotiations. Prior to his arrival in London, he had earmarked 31 January as a day for national strike action should the British not have accepted the AFPFL as the national government. Back in Burma, the situation had escalated. Communist groups were preparing for open rebellion. On 10 January, the communists attacked AFPFL followers and the police in Rangoon. On 21 January, some 5,000 members of the Red Flag Communist Party (RCFP), a radical breakaway faction of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), attempted to storm the government offices in the capital and had to be driven away by

[87] F 1149/3/61, Memorandum by Dening, 20 January 1947, FO 371/63466, TNA, pp.1-2.
[88] F 1149/3/61, Minute by Sargent, 20 January 1947, FO 371/63466, TNA.
[89] FE 47/3, Bevin to Attlee, 23 January 1947, FO 800/462, TNA – Unchanged from Dening's text.

British troops.[90] News of these developments were fed back to the British negotiators as Aung San was able to present the AFPFL as a stabilising force in Burma. Just six days later Aung San joined Attlee on the steps of 10 Downing Street to announce the signing of an agreement for Burma's independence from Britain, setting a date for January 1948. An interim British government would remain in place until the next general election, scheduled for April. Results of this election would inform the creation of a constituent assembly which would manage Burma's transition to independence.

The terms of Burma's negotiated independence increased Britain's interest in aiding that country's post-war economic recovery. The British had already agreed two interest free loans of £8 million and £7.5 million to Burma for 1945-46 and 1946-47 respectively. As part of the independence deal, they committed themselves to pay further advances to make up any deficit Burma may find itself in up until the end of the then current Burmese financial year, ending September 1947.[91] Despite being presented as a display of British assistance to Burma, the loans were not gifts and, due to their own economic difficulties, Britain was determined to see that they were paid back in full. One way of ensuring this was to continue to support the rehabilitation of the Burmese rice trade.

In the April 1947 election, the AFPFL achieved a landslide victory, winning 173 seats out of a possible 210 available in the constituent assembly. With the AFPFL in charge and the strikes of dock and mill workers having come to an end, the British hoped that Burmese rice exports would return to expected levels. Shipments for April, however, remained well below what had been predicted. To remedy this, Maj-Gen. Russell visited Rangoon to meet with Burma Government officials. Russell was informed by the State Agricultural Projects Board that the continued shortfalls in export were not a result of a shortage of rice, which was readily

[90] Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Wars*, p.306.
[91] CP (47) 41, Annex B – Finance, 27 January 1947, CAB 129/16/41, TNA, p.5.

available, but rather a lack of shipping.[92] The strikes had upset the shipping schedules set by the Special Commission's monthly liaison meetings. In response to the Burmese Government's revelations, Wright telegrammed London for help. Aware that the Ministry of Transport had already made available the maximum number of ships that it had to spare to ship rice in South-East Asia, Wright asked the Foreign Office to pressure the Government of India for more shipping.[93] In communicating this request to the Government of India, London essentially attempted to blackmail them. A telegram to Terence Shone, High Commissioner to India, stated that if Burmese rice exports continued to falter through lack of shipping, India would 'inevitably bear their share of loss in rice if it should prove impossible to find ships'.[94]

The Indian Government fought back against London's input. Lord Listowel, the recently appointed Secretary of State for India and Burma following Pethick-Lawrence's resignation, wrote directly to Alfred Barnes, Minister of Transport. Listowel linked the issue of shipping with Britain's loan to Burma.

> Apart from extreme urgency of speeding up rice shipments from Burma in the interest of feeding Malaya, Ceylon, India and other British territories in the Far East, you will I am sure appreciate that rice exports are by far the largest item on the credit side of Burma's balance of trade and the main source (other than loans) to which she must look for the external financial resources necessary for the rehabilitation of her war-shattered economy. HMG themselves have indeed an important financial interest in expediting rice exports from Burma to the greatest possible extent in view of the loans which the Treasury are advancing to the Government of Burma.[95]

Staff at the Foreign Office agreed with Listowel's argument. In preparing a brief for Bevin to continue to press the Ministry of Transport to release more ships, Allen wrote that he was 'reluctant' to accept the Ministry's argument that they were unable to make extra shipping available. In his view, the additional ships '<u>could</u> be made available if the urgency of the problem were fully realised and ships were diverted from other tasks.'[96] In communicating the

[92] F 6405/2/61, Wright to Foreign Office, 8 May 1947, FO 371/63479, TNA, p.1.
[93] F 6405/2/61, Wright to Foreign Office, 8 May 1947, FO 371/63479, TNA, p.2.
[94] F 6405/2/61, Cabinet Office to Terence Shone, 19 May 1947, FO 371/63479, TNA, p.2.
[95] F 6730/2/61, Listowel to Barnes, 23 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.1.
[96] F 6730/2/61, Memorandum by Allen, 24 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.1

Foreign Office view to the Ministry of Transport, Bevin took a wider view. The shipping situation in Burma was not merely a regional issue but had international implications, he said. Since the start of the rice shortage, the British had used Australian wheat to supplement rice shipments to Malaya and Singapore. Now faced with a wheat shortage in the British occupation zone in Germany, Bevin hoped to use Australian supplies to relieve this issue. Increasing Burmese rice exports would allow the British to make this switch and using Australian wheat to feed their occupation zone would also limit the need to buy from American sources and reduce Britain's dollar expenditure.[97] Despite the arguments presented by the India Office and Foreign Office, the Ministry of Transport remained unmoved, informing the Foreign Office that it felt, unlike the Burmese Government, the present hold-up in rice exports was not the result of lack of shipping but rather from delays to loading rice due to the strike action of dock-workers in Rangoon. Now that this had passed, the Ministry stated that they fully expected Burmese rice exports to return to predicted levels.[98]

British interests in rehabilitating Burma's rice industry were not purely financial. The colony's exports had played a key part in British efforts to orchestrate a regional food security policy which was designed to prevent famine in Malaya and Singapore. Now with Burma promised independence, the British still wanted their former colony to continue its contribution to the IEFC system of allocation and distribution of rice in South-East Asia. The Burmese Government had other ideas and held the IEFC system to be overly prohibitive for it controlled both the quantity and destination of Burmese rice exports. At the July Liaison Officers' Meeting, U Myint Tun, the Burmese representative, enquired as to whether Burma would be allowed to export 'a token quantity' of 10,000 tons of 'high quality' rice to either Britain or the rest of Western Europe. This rice would be drawn from Burma's domestic supply and would not be subtracted from export availabilities. Myint Tun argued that permitting such an export would

[97] F 6730/2/61, Bevin to Barnes, 28 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, pp.1-2.
[98] F 6730/2/61, Foreign Office to Wright, 29 May 1947, FO 371/63480, TNA, p.1.

benefit Burma. It would 'encourage local producers, assist in the resumption of pre-war trade and help to provide funds towards the rehabilitation of the country.'[99] The proposal received the support of the delegates from French Indochina and Siam. Both rice-exporting countries, they saw that agreeing to the Burmese request would likely result in the IEFC allowing French Indochina and Siam to also export rice outside of South-East Asia. Representatives from Hong Kong and Malaya, both rice-importing countries, disagreed. The delegate for Malaya was especially vocal in his opposition, telling the meeting that 'there was a market in Malaya and Singapore for all the rice which could be obtained' and, as far as he was concerned, South-East Asian territories should still have 'first refusal' on any rice available for export in the region.[100]

Despite this opposition, the Burmese were committed to gaining approval to export rice outside of South-East Asia. In August 1947, the Foreign Office received intelligence indicating that the Government of Burma were considering whether Burma should adhere to IEFC allocations throughout 1948 or sell its rice entirely independently. Relaying this to Killearn, London reinforced its commitment to maintaining the international system of rice allocation and told Killearn that he should 'make all possible efforts' to encourage Burma to remain within the IEFC framework.[101] Killearn raised the issue with Burmese staff in Singapore but found no explicit evidence to support London's fears. He did suggest, however, that if the IEFC continued to refuse Burma permission, it might well leave the IEFC in protest anyway which would undermine British efforts to feed Malaya and Singapore.

> In South-East Asia the forces opposed to IEFC control appear to be gathering strength. We continue to do our best to check them; but the outlook at present is far from encouraging … If Burma fails us what then? … I am not unmindful of the dangers of permitting Burma to export even a small quantity of rice to Europe … But are not the dangers that face us and sacrifices that will have to be made in South-East Asia if Burma leaves the fold even greater?[102]

[99] F 10263/2/61, Minutes of Fourteenth Liaison Officers' Meeting, 15-16 July 1947, FO 371/63487, TNA, p.17
[100] F 10263/2/61, Minutes of Fourteenth Liaison Officers' Meeting, 15-16 July 1947, FO 371/63487, TNA, p.17
[101] F 11974/2/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 18 August 1947, FO 371/63490, TNA, p.1.
[102] F 11963/2/61, Killean to Foreign Office, 30 August 1947, FO 371/63490, TNA, p.2.

Because of the precarious rice situation in South-East Asia, Killearn urged London to consider accommodation of Burma's request to export 10,000 tons of rice to Europe to ensure Burma remained within IEFC. Further to this, he also suggested that the MoF assist Burma in acquiring groundnut oil. Rice was not the only foodstuff in short supply in South-East Asia and the IEFC was also responsible for allocating oils. Should Britain help Burma to acquire additional allocation of groundnut oil, Killearn said that it 'would be a manifestly clear example' to the Burmese of the advantages of remaining in the IEFC.[103]

Whitehall was preparing for Burma to make representations to meetings of both the IEFC Rice and IEFC Central committees in Washington to export rice to Europe at the meetings scheduled for November 1947. The Ministry of Food, however, felt that the 10,000-ton shipment proposed by Burma was essentially worthless, for anything less than 50,000 tons would have no real impact on either the cereal ration in Britain or the Burmese economy. Nevertheless, the Ministry would allow Burma to make its case to the IEFC, albeit with limited British support.[104] The Foreign Office appeared to have been supplied with conflicting information by the Ministry of Food. Christofas minuted that he was expecting a reversal of the IEFC ban on allocating South-East Asian rice to Europe for the following reasons:

> Not only would rice be popular in Europe (Europe imported about 1,000,000 tons a year before the war), but there is considerable capital sunk in European rice mills, which are at present idle … Furthermore, a number of the exporting countries would like to see their rice trade with Europe resumed. Firstly, Europe was, before the war, one of their markets. Secondly, Europe takes rice of a higher grade than Asia, and this rice of course sells at a higher price. Thirdly, I understand that the profit margin on it is correspondingly greater.[105]

Christofas went on to say that, as far as he was aware, Sanderson would in fact be lobbying the British Food Mission to help Burma. Indeed, Richard Allen had been personally informed by

[103] F 12036/2/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 30 August 1947, FO 371/63490, TNA, p.1.
[104] F 13294/2/61, Ministry of Food to British Food Mission, Washington, 26 September 1947, FO 371/63493, TNA, p.1.
[105] F 13294/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 3 October 1947, FO 371/63493, TNA.

Sanderson that, in his opinion, Europe was the most suitable destination for the rice which, given its supposed quality, was too expensive for South-East Asia.[106]

To add to the confusion, there was no hint by the Burmese representative at the October Liaison Officers' Meeting that his country was preparing to undermine the IEFC system of allocation which the British were keen to maintain. He stated that the increase in rice exports from Burma in 1947 had, in fact, only been possible 'because of the understanding and sympathy with which Burmese political wishes for self-determination' had been viewed by Britain.[107]

Civil War and the Influence of Communism

On 4 January 1948, Burma became an independent republic outside of the British Commonwealth. Reflecting the post-independence state of Anglo-Burmese relations, British policy in Burma would now be managed in Whitehall through the Foreign Office. The Cabinet post of Secretary of State for Burma was abolished and Rance returned to London having been replaced in Rangoon by Reginald James Bowker, the first British Ambassador to the Union of Burma. The transition to independence was not, however, smooth. Aung San himself did not live to see an independent Burma, being assassinated in July 1947 alongside six other members of his government. The treaty he signed with Attlee in the previous January which laid the foundations for Burmese self-rule was criticised by communist groups in Burma. Both the CPB and RFCP argued that the treaty had not gone far enough in distancing the country from continued British imperial influence. In April 1948, following a period of unrest including further strikes and protests, paramilitary groups associated with the CPB began an armed rebellion against the new Republic's government.

Because of the wider regional implications for food supply, British officials in South-East Asia were immediately concerned with the possible effect of communist activities on rice

[106] F 13294/2/61, Minute by Christofas, 3 October 1947, FO 371/63493, TNA.
[107] F 13986/20/61, Minutes of Sixteenth Liaison Officers' Meeting, 1-2 October 1947, FO 371/63495, TNA, p.6.

procurement in an independent Burma. Between January to June 1948, Burma was due to ship 152,000 tons of rice to Malaya and Singapore, providing the two colonies with around three quarters of their allocation for the first half of the year.[108] At the outbreak of fighting in April between communist rebels and the government, Burma was already behind on its promised deliveries to Malaya. Malcolm MacDonald, now Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, relayed his anxieties to Bowker. MacDonald commented that, with Burma already struggling to meet its export commitments, 'any default on their part will be disastrous' for the region, but especially so for British territories that were now drawing most of their international allocation from Burma.[109]

The possibility of the complete cessation of shipments from Burma caused the British to re-evaluate their system for the procurement and export of rice operating in Burma. During this period, London's political and economic interest in maintaining control of Burmese rice supplies remained constant. Under direct British rule, the MoF were responsible for both procurement and export of rice in Burma, acting as the official agent of the Burmese Government. Now, with Burma independent, this arrangement was under scrutiny. In a memorandum presented to the SEAF Committee, MoF staff in London suggested that Britain should seek to maintain its monopoly over Burma's rice supplies. Rather than continue to act on the behalf of the Burma Government, they proposed to approach the Burmese with the intention of purchasing the country's 1949 rice crop in full.[110] They saw this not only as an opportunity to secure future rice for British territories in South-East Asia but also as financial investment. MoF control over Burmese rice supplies prevented the Burma Government from trading its rice on the open market. While this had been beneficial to Burma in the immediate

[108] F 3088/20/61, Minutes of International Emergency Food Council Sub-Committee on Rice for South-East Asia, Paper No.1 – Rice Availabilities and Shipping Programmes, 4 February 1948, FO 371/69664, TNA, p.6.
[109] F 7539/20/61, MacDonald to Bowker, 26 May 1948, FO 371/69668, TNA, p.1.
[110] SEAF (48) 12, Future Policy regarding the Allocation, Procurement and Distribution of Rice, 8 April 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA, p.2.

aftermath of the war, guaranteeing both a buyer and a fixed price for their rice, the continued high price of Burmese rice was viewed as an obstacle. While other cereal prices were now in decline, rice had remained high. Wheat, for instance, had been prospectively fixed at £18.10s.0d per ton by an international agreement. Rice from both Burma and Siam, however, was still priced at £38 per ton. The Burma price included an export tax of £10 on each ton, described as a 'rehabilitation fee' by the MoF. In presenting the memorandum to the SEAF Committee, Sir Harold Sanderson, Director of Rice at the Ministry, informed his colleagues that, while the existing system of British control should continue, they should do all they could to reduce the price of Burmese rice to around £25 per ton.[111] The potential of cheaper rice appeared to have swayed officials in London. While the MoF proposals received initial endorsement by the SEAF Committee, final approval was dependent on the response of British officials in South-East Asia.

These reactions were mixed. Edward Gent, now High Commissioner for the Federation of Malaya, agreed with them. Gent suggested, however, that any approach made to Burma regarding the reduction in price must be subject to the satisfaction of the Malayan colonial government that it would not be detrimental to the colony's rice imports from Burma.[112] Franklin Gimson, Governor of Singapore, expressed a similar opinion. Ideally Gimson wanted the £10 export tax cancelled, stating that he found it 'inequitable' that Singapore 'a war-devasted country … be called upon to subscribe heavily to the rehabilitation of another.'[113] Like Gent, he displayed a sense of caution about pressing the Burma Government too hard on the matter, especially if it might result in them committing less rice for export, commenting how 'the whole stability of the rice situation in South-East Asia depends on our supplies from Burma.'[114] On the other hand, British diplomats in Burma were wholly opposed to the MoF proposals. Bowker was critical of the Ministry's intentions, dismissing the attempt to reduce

[111] SEAF (48) 3rd Meeting, 12 April 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA, pp.4-5.
[112] SEAF (48) 25, Gent to Creech Jones, 20 May 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA, p.1.
[113] SEAF (48) 25, Gimson to Creech Jones, 22 May 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA. p.1.
[114] SEAF (48) 25, Gimson to Creech Jones, 22 May 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA. p.2.

the price of Burmese rice as merely 'a speculative business proposition.' He suspected that the MoF were seeking to profit from the situation, purchasing rice at a cheaper price from Burma and then selling it on at a higher price to territories in need. Bowker aired his criticisms directly to Bevin.

> While from the financial point of view this course might have its advantages, it is in my opinion that we should not give Burma any chance of alleging that the United Kingdom is involved in this matter for financial profit, and is not honestly concerned in the fair allocation of rice surpluses in accordance with the real needs of South-East Asia.[115]

Accusations that Britain was continuing to exploit the resources of its former colony even after independence were antithetical to the supposedly enlightened approach to imperial rule that a Labour government was keen to promote. Not only did it risk Britain's relationship with Burma but also jeopardised access to rice needed to feed Malaya and Singapore

Foreign Office staff in Whitehall decided to test Bowker's suspicions. Kenneth Christofas, of the South-East Asia Department, sounded out both the MoF and the Treasury in drafting a ministerial reply to Bowker. E.L. Ridley, Deputy Director of Rice at the Ministry, told Christofas that their proposal had been based on information received from their representative attached to the British Embassy in Rangoon who indicated to his superiors in London his doubts about the MoF remaining the official agent of the Burmese Government. Direct British responsibility for the Burmese rice trade had, in the opinion of the Ministry representative, made the Burmese Government 'less efficient and more lazy' when it came to encouraging the export of rice.[116] The MoF's intention to cut their direct link to Burmese rice supply also concealed a political motive. They wanted to persuade the Burmese government to reduce the price of their rice exports. Burma, which made the majority of its income from rice, might then find itself in financial difficulties due to the reduction. In this event, the Ministry argued, 'the Burma Government will naturally blame us and will allege that we have decided to avenge

[115] F 9304/20/61, Bowker to Bevin, 23 June 1948, FO 371/69671, TNA, p.1.
[116] F 9304/20/61, Ridley to Christofas, 12 July 1948, FO 371/69671, TNA, p.1.

ourselves on Burma by forcing down the price of rice and driving her to bankruptcy.'[117] By reducing Britain's role in the Burma rice trade to solely that of a buyer, the MoF sought to absolve themselves of responsibility in the former colony, again appearing to run counter to the image of a benevolent imperial power the Labour Government had been attempting to create. The Treasury, on the other hand, wanted to maintain direct Ministry control over Burmese rice supplies. It had a clear economic rationale for this. Burmese rice had become a source of dollars for Britain, being sold to dollar-paying territories such as the Philippines. So long as the IEFC continued to allocate Burmese rice to the Philippines and the MoF continued to function as the official agent of the Burma Government, the dollar-making potential of Burmese rice exports would remain. Further to this, the Treasury was averse to Britain paying for the whole of Burma's 1949 surplus up-front without guaranteed contracts to sell it on to recipient territories.[118] The Treasury's financial arguments appeared to have had the final say on the matter, as Bevin informed Bowker that London was to negotiate with the Burmese Government for the Ministry to remain the official agent of procurement and export of rice in Burma.[119]

These arrangements, however, would mean nothing if the supply of rice from Burma was disrupted. In early August 1948, communist insurgents occupied the port city of Bassein, seizing an estimated 50,000 tons of rice. MacDonald reported to London that the communist presence in Bassein had resulted in the closure of the port and that consequently the Burmese Government had withdrawn their estimated September export availabilities.[120] The Foreign Office reaction to this withdrawal was one of immediate calm. The announcement had given them a limited window of opportunity to try and seek alternative sources for a September shipment to Malaya. Christofas minuted that 'there was nothing we can do at present … all our territories hold at least two months' stock so we can afford to wait and see how things

[117] F 9304/20/61, Ridley to Christofas, 12 July 1948, FO 371/69671, TNA, p.1.
[118] F 9304/20/61, Jenkyns to Christofas, 27 July 1948, FO 371/69671, TNA, pp.1-2.
[119] F 9304/20/61, Bevin to Bowker, 4 August 1948, FO 371/69671, TNA, pp.
[120] F 10943/20/61, MacDonald to Foreign Office, 6 August 1948, FO 371/69673, TNA, p.1.

develop.'[121] London's patience was limited, however. Should internal political conflict in Burma lead to the total collapse of the rice trade for the remainder of the year, British territories in South-East Asia would find themselves short of food. In such an event, Christofas suggested that Britain would have no choice but to ask the IEFC to reconsider its allocations for the region.[122]

British policy was hamstrung by the interconnectedness of the South-East Asian rice trade. Despite the apparent coolness amongst staff in the Foreign Office, Bevin raised his own concerns directly to Cabinet. Should Britain successfully persuade the IEFC to re-allocate Siamese rice to Malaya and Singapore to make up the deficit in Burmese supplies, the Siamese would consequently accumulate an 'abnormally heavy' sterling balance following payment by the British. [123] Since the beginning of the South-East Asian rice shortage, Britain had struggled to maintain a consistent supply of consumer goods to Siam on which the Siamese Government could spend its sterling balance and reduce its debt to Britain. If they acquired an increased balance of sterling and had no means of disposing of it, Bevin feared that the Siamese might instead ask the British to pay for rice exports in American dollars, a currency which Britain was desperately short of itself.

The Cabinet discussions were relayed to the SEAF Committee. Sanderson feared that Britain's financial position might jeopardise its famine prevention policy. The MoF were also in favour of asking the IEFC to review the 1948 allocations of rice. Sanderson told the committee that this would inevitably lead to some dollar expenditure, but he expressed hope that, given the pressing need to avert famine in Malaya and Singapore, the Treasury would sanction this outlay. After all, it would put Britain in 'a very awkward position' if, after having successfully persuaded the IEFC to re-allocate the balance of 1948 availabilities to British

[121] F 10943/20/61, Minute by Christofas, 10 August 1948, FO 371/69673, TNA.
[122] F 10943/20/61, Minute by Christofas, 10 August 1948, FO 371/69673, TNA.
[123] CM (48) 56th Conclusions, 16 August 1948, CAB 128/13/16, TNA, p.168.

territories, that they were unable to accept the re-allocation because of the Treasury's reluctance to spend dollars.[124] For Sanderson, the communist insurgency in Burma exposed the true nature of British imperial power in post-war South-East Asia. For all their efforts to reassert their position and restore some prestige, the problem of rice in Burma 'had shown how much His Majesty's Government were in the hands of independent countries'.[125] The SEAF Committee concluded that final decisions on the Burma rice situation had to be made at Cabinet level and established a working party to draft a memorandum outlining the policy courses open to Britain, which might lessen the impact of the cessation of rice exports from Burma for presentation to the Cabinet.

After two weeks of scrutiny, the final draft was put in front of the SEAF Committee in early September. The suspension of Burmese rice exports had led to a loss of 320,000 tons of rice, nearly half of the total supplies expected to be available in South-East Asia for the last third of 1948. The minimum amount of rice required for British colonial territories was estimated at over 98,000 tons.[126] A range of options were suggested to make up this deficit. A return to a reduced rice ration in Malaya and Singapore was ruled out, being described as 'highly inadvisable' on political grounds. Instead, the British sought to redistribute what supplies it already had as well as seek other external sources. Britain itself should surrender its 46,000 ton allocation of rice from the South-East Asia pool. 24,000 tons had already been shipped to Britain and it would cost roughly £1.5 million to transport this quantity back to South-East Asia. The British now also expected the IEFC to review its rice allocations in response to the suspension of shipments from Burma. The working party predicted that British territories would be offered rice from sources outside of South-East Asia, including producers in the Western Hemisphere such as the United States, Brazil, and Chile, as a result of the review.

[124] SEAF (48) 5th Meeting, 18 August 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA, p.1.
[125] SEAF (48) 5th Meeting, 18 August 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA, p.3.
[126] SEAF (48) 36, Rice Supplies: South-East Asia, 9 September 1948, CAB 134/682, p.1.

In this event, it was suggested that Britain accept a limited amount of rice, only 30,000 tons, from these sources to minimise dollar expenditure. The cost of this rice from these other sources was estimated at just over $7 million.[127]

Bevin presented the memorandum to his Cabinet colleagues and, in stressing the desirability of avoiding ration cuts in Malaya, asked that they approve the SEAF Committee's recommendations. Cripps, now Chancellor of the Exchequer, was 'anxious' to avoid spending dollars on rice. In his view, Britain should still look to Siam for further supplies. After all, that country had just experienced a record harvest and recent changes to British procurement policy there should, in theory, make it easier to obtain more from Siam. Only if Britain was still unable to acquire enough rice from Siam to cover the fall in Burmese exports would the Cabinet approve the dollar expenditure recommended by the SEAF Committee.[128]

It was not only their own dollar expenditure that British officials were cautious of. Given the instability of sterling, they were wary that rice exporting countries in South-East Asia might attempt to sell more of their produce to countries prepared to pay in dollars. The MoF expected Burma to send a delegation to Japan to hold discussions with General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), the head of the American-led occupation government in Tokyo, over a dollar deal for Burmese rice. The dollars would then be used to pay for textiles and other consumer goods, which Britain had previously failed to supply Burma in sufficient quantities, from Japanese or American sources. This deal would take place outside of IEFC allocations and the MoF appeared content to let it go ahead. They did not believe the Americans would require more than 250,000 tons for Japan, leaving an estimated 750,000 tons of rice available for IEFC allocation in South-East Asia. The Ministry were happy to allow Burma to sell this limited quantity to the Americans as they believed that ultimately, the deal would leave the Burmese disappointed, doubting both the quality and availability of consumer

[127] SEAF (48) 36, Rice Supplies: South-East Asia, 9 September 1948, CAB 134/682, TNA. pp.2-4.
[128] CM (48) 59th Conclusions, 10 September 1948, CAB 128/13/19, TNA, p.9.

goods that they could obtain in Japan. Faced with disappointment, the Burmese would likely 'fall back' on existing arrangements with Britain, leaving the MoF as the official export agent and hence the majority of Burma's exportable rice under British control. [129]

The Foreign Office disagreed with the MoF's conclusions. Christofas minuted that the MoF's policy essentially amounted to an 'appeasement' of Burma. Another called for Britain to take a firmer stance towards the former colony for 'however much we try to help … they simply grumble and say that we should have done more.'[130] Christofas wrote to the Treasury that there was 'every chance to suppose that Burma would be quite willing to flout the International Emergency Food Council' if it meant an increase in consumer goods for the country. It was 'essential' to the continued operations of the IEFC system 'that Burma be forced to make all her exportable surplus available for allocation.' In fact, the Foreign Office believed that they could use the IEFC to force Burma into selling more of its rice to British territories in South-East Asia. Given the disruption caused by the civil war, the amount of rice Burma was able to export in 1949 was estimated at only 500,000 tons, significantly less than the 800,000 plus tons it had been able to export in 1947 and was predicted to again export by the end of 1948. This decline in exports, the Foreign Office argued, 'substantially reduced' Burma's importance as a source of rice and would make it possible for the British 'to form a ring of importers who would refuse to buy except in accordance with International Emergency Food Council's allocation.' [131] With no external market for their rice, Burma would be forced to submit to the IEFC to guarantee sales, ensuring export to Malaya and Singapore.

The British turned to Washington in an attempt to further isolate Burma. Oliver Franks, British Ambassador to the United States, communicated to the Foreign Office that they would ask the State Department to stop MacArthur from buying Burmese rice. Allocations of rice

[129] F 13602/20/61, Wintersgill to Mark, 27 September 1948, FO 371/69676, TNA, p.1.
[130] F 13602/20/61, Minutes, 1 October 1948, FO 371/69676, TNA.
[131] F 13602/20/61, Christofas to Mark, 11 October 1948, FO 371/69676, TNA, p.1.

must be made 'on basis of need of food deficit countries' rather than financial profit for the exporting country.[132] A few days later British diplomatic staff met with Elbert G. Mathews, Director of the State Department Office of South Asian Affairs, to discuss MacArthur's proposed purchase. They told the Americans of their concern about the effect that events in Burma might have on regional food supplies.

> Great efforts had been made in the past two years to feed the hungry millions and most satisfactory results have been obtained. But the Burmese disturbances threatened to upset all our calculations and to undo much of the good work already done.[133]

The Burmese approach to MacArthur was described as 'most unfortunate' as the British expressed their hope that the Americans would share the view 'that any attempt to side track the international system of allocation could only be harmful.'[134] The British argued that Japan did not need the Burmese rice as desperately as British territories in South-East Asia. The latest figures showed that the Allied occupation government had been able to issue a daily cereal ration of 13 ounces in Japan. Malaya and Singapore, on the other hand, were only able to supply 9.1 and 9.7 ounces respectively. Beyond humanitarian need, however, British diplomats admitted to the Foreign Office that they thought their case was weak. The only saving grace that became apparent during these discussions was that the Americans did agree that the collapse of the IEFC allocation system had to be prevented.[135]

Simultaneous to their diplomatic efforts in Washington, the British were continuing to monitor the situation in Burma. In an attempt to seize the initiative, Whitehall instructed Bowker to open negotiations with the Burmese Government for the MoF to remain the official agent for the sale of their rice exports through 1949 before the IEFC met at the end of November to set rice allocations for the next year.[136] Bowker, however, refused to move until he had a

[132] F 14817/20/61, Franks to Foreign Office, 23 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.
[133] F 15178/20/61, Graves to Grey, 27 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.
[134] F 15178/20/61, Graves to Grey, 27 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, pp.1-2.
[135] F 15178/20/61, Graves to Grey, 27 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, pp.1-2.
[136] F 14756/20/61, Foreign Office to Bowker, 30 October 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.

clear picture of the results of the Anglo-American discussions and told London that setting such a short deadline for him to begin negotiations with Burma was detrimental to British interests. In Bowker's opinion it would 'only emphasise our own eagerness for an agreement and thereby lead the Burmese to think that their hand has been strengthened' and might therefore encourage Burma to seek IEFC approval for its proposed sale of rice to MacArthur.[137] London appeared unmoved by their ambassador's protest. Despite not being a member of the Commonwealth, Burma had remained in the sterling area. To keep Burma from seeking other sources of currency, the Treasury announced in mid-October that it would allow Burma to draw on hard-currency worth up to £2 million from British reserves. The Foreign Office told Bowker that the British Government believed that this new financial agreement had 'created a fund of goodwill … which may make the Burmese Government willing to accept our rice proposals.' [138] Accordingly Bowker approached the Burmese, and he received the response he had expected from the beginning. The Burmese Government told Bowker that it could not begin negotiations with him within the timeframe London desired.[139] Officials of its State Agricultural Marketing Board, with whom the British would be discussing the issue, were not in Rangoon as they had already departed to represent Burma at the upcoming IEFC meeting in Washington.

With Burma clearly holding the advantage, the British had one final gambit to stop Burma selling its rice to MacArthur. Throughout the summer of 1948, Anglo-American diplomats had been negotiating in Tokyo for a trading agreement between the American occupation government and the sterling area. Under the terms of the deal, finalised on 9 November (the same day as Bowker's above telegram), all payments made between SCAP and the sterling area were to be conducted solely in sterling. The Treasury wrote to the Foreign Office on 10 November to suggest that this clause might be enough to stop the transaction, thus keeping

[137] F 15332/20/61, Bowker to Foreign Office, 2 November 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.
[138] F 15332/20/61, Foreign Office to Bowker, 2 November 1948, FO 371/69678, TNA, p.1.
[139] F 15728/20/61, Bowker to Foreign Office, 9 November 1948, FO 371/69679, TNA, p.1.

Burma rice within the IEFC pool and available to ship to British colonial territory in South-East Asia.[140] The Treasury admitted that this was hardly a foolproof solution. It was based on two assumptions. First, that the United States would not break its agreement with Britain, and second, that Burma only wanted dollars for its rice. Indeed, the Treasury commented that the Burmese might still sell to SCAP for sterling or, the Americans might turn to Siam for rice instead, a circumstance that would not 'be any better' for Britain's objective of keeping as much South-East Asian-produced rice within the grasp of Malaya and Singapore.[141] Whether or not this was sufficient warning is unclear. Reports of the IEFC meeting make no reference to the Burma delegation ever proposing a sale of rice to MacArthur. What they do show, however, is a rejection of an application on behalf of SCAP for 200,000 tons of rice from Siam which was met with 'warm approval' in Singapore.[142]

Conclusion

Britain's attempts to procure rice from Burma to alleviate the food crisis in South-East Asia does much to illuminate the true nature of British imperial rule in the aftermath of the Second World War, revealing not only the agency of colonial governments in the British imperial system but also the nationalist independence movements which would take their place. Britain's relationship with Burma then appears somewhat counter-intuitive. While Burma was still a British colony, albeit one earmarked for eventual self-government, London offered to help with the rehabilitation of the Burmese rice industry. The rationale behind this was two-fold. First, rice was one of Burma's main exportable produce and restoring rice exports would revive the colony's economy and create a stable financial platform for independence. Secondly, if Burma was able to export more rice, it would increase the availability for allocation to Malaya and Singapore. Once Burma became an independent state outside of the Commonwealth,

[140] F 16019/20/61, Henley to Grey, 10 November 1948, FO 371/69679, TNA, p.1.
[141] F 16019/20/61, Henley to Grey, 10 November 1948, FO 371/69679, TNA, p.1.
[142] *The Straits Times*, 16 December 1948, p.6.

however, this relationship changed. The issues of continued Ministry of Food control over Burmese rice and the Burma Government's attempts to sell outside of the international system meant Britain adopted a somewhat more belligerent approach. It attempted to portray the importance of Burma as minimal, that Britain could get more rice from other sources (if it wanted) and enlist the support of other countries to isolate Burma on the international stage.

6: French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies

The previous chapters of this thesis have analysed British food security policy within the context of Britain's place in the post-war international community as well as London's relationship with three of its own colonies (Malaya, Singapore, and Burma) and an independent Siam. These cases all demonstrate how managing the supply of food became an important part of Britain's attempt to reassert and reinforce its power in South-East Asia after the Second World War. This chapter moves the focus to Britain's attempts to procure rice from the other European colonial territories in the region, French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies.

The close co-operation between Britain and other European imperial powers had arisen as a means to defend themselves from American anti-imperial criticism during the war. During the war, United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt was particularly outspoken when it came to French colonialism. After tense discussions with Free France leader Charles de Gaulle at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, for instance, Roosevelt remarked to his son Elliott that 'Anything must be better, than to live under French rule!'[1] The American president had envisioned a gradual end to colonialism through an international trusteeship council. Overseen by the United Nations, this was to be a supervisory body into which imperial powers could voluntarily place their colonies to help them transition to independence. For the British, this was unacceptable. They argued that they had always held their colonial territories in 'trust' – that the ultimate aim of British imperialism was to guide the colonies to self-government through political, economic, and social development. Attlee, in his role as Chair of the Armistice and Post-War Committee, put forward a memorandum to the War Cabinet in December 1944 which stated that, given the increasing role colonial societies were 'taking in the task of planning and promoting their own welfare', the term 'partnership' was 'felt to

[1] E. Roosevelt, *As He Saw It*, (New York, NY: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), p.115, cited in Wm. R. Louis, *Imperialism at Bay 1941-1945*: *The United States and the Decolonisation of the British Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.27.

interpret more correctly the outlook of colonial peoples themselves towards the present phase of their political evolution within the British Commonwealth'.[2] Through the suggestion that the British Empire was a mutually beneficial 'partnership' between metropole and colony, the British were attempting to distance themselves from joining Roosevelt's trusteeship scheme. Implying that they were already undertaking a progressive direction in their imperial policies, British policy-makers hoped to convince the Americans that it would be unnecessary for Britain to be part of the scheme, thus preserving total British control over their own imperial affairs and warding off international interference. Roosevelt's sudden death in April 1945, however, ensured that the President's grand designs never materialised. Roosevelt had gradually distanced himself from the principal of trusteeship in the months before his death. Under his successor Harry S. Truman, there was a particularly activist element within the State Department which, citing escalating Cold War tensions, favoured the strengthening of American ties with the European colonial powers and sought to move further away from Roosevelt's trusteeship model.[3] Despite Washington's change in mood, the European powers still set out defending their claims on empire. The British 'readily recognised that a united front among the colonial powers would decrease the likelihood of individual possessions being stripped' and therefore came to support both the French and Dutch claims to restore their empires in South-East Asia.[4]

After the war, this colonial collaboration took on a new importance. Bevin pursued closer relations with Western European colonial powers, especially France. He envisaged that the European colonial nations would provide an alternative bloc in the increasingly bipolar world of the early Cold War, standing independent of the capitalist United States and communist

[2] WP (44) 738, 16 December 1944, CAB 66/59/38, TNA, p.3.
[3] M.A. Lawrence, 'Transnational Coalition-Building and the Making of the Cold War in Indochina, 1947-1949', *Diplomatic History*, 26:3, 2002, p.462.
[4] Sbrega, *Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia*, p.87.

Soviet Union.[5] This was especially important in relation to France and the Netherlands. As with the British, the reoccupation of colonial territory would provide the French and the Dutch with the resources to aid the economic recovery of the metropole.[6] A revitalised France and Netherlands would not only provide strong allies in Africa and Asia but also be more than capable partners in resisting possible Soviet expansion on the European continent.

In South-East Asia, the security of the European empires was becoming increasingly interlinked. French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies, by virtue of wartime military command structures, had become part of Britain's sphere of influence. With Malaya and Singapore situated between French Indochina to the north-east and the Netherlands East Indies to the south, it was no wonder British officials found South-East Asia appropriate for some form of colonial co-operation. As Ian Wilson-Young, the first head of the Foreign Office South-East Asia Department, put it at the beginning of 1946:

> there is a need for co-ordinating machinery for economic and supply matters … Indeed the value of regional organisations in assisting economic development in the sense of increasing the wealth and welfare of a region and its inhabitants has been accepted by the Colonial Office in other parts of the world (e.g. West Africa and the West Indies). Such an organisation seems equally well suited for South-East Asia, which comprises, apart from Siam, a number of colonial territories, with the mother countries of which it is our general policy to develop the closest community of interests.

The Foreign Office argued that this collaboration should not be resigned to economic matters, embracing 'the common problems' of food shortages and its effects on the health and welfare of the local populations in South-East Asia.[7]

French Indochina

The third major rice producing territory of South-East Asia, besides Burma and Siam, was French Indochina. Consisting of Laos, Cambodia and the Vietnamese protectorates of Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina, French colonial control dated back to the mid-nineteenth

[5] A. Deighton, 'Entente Neo-Coloniale?: Ernest Bevin and the Proposals for an Anglo-French Third World Power, 1945-1949', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 17:4, 2006, p.843
[6] See White, 'Reconstructing Europe through Rejuvenating Empire', pp.211-236.
[7] F 348/36/61, Memorandum by Ian Wilson-Young, 6 January 1946, FO 371/53974, TNA, p.2.

century. Like most of South-East Asia, the colony experienced a politically tumultuous Second World War. When France fell in the summer of 1940, the Vichy regime continued to administer the colony, albeit effectively as a client state of Japan. In March 1945, with France liberated and the European war nearing its end, the Japanese launched an invasion of French Indochina, occupying the territory. Decades of external domination had seen an organised nationalist movement develop in the colony. With encouragement from Japanese occupiers, the Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai declared independence from France. Following the Japanese surrender in August, Bao Dai lost his base of support. The Viet Minh, a political coalition led by Ho Chi Minh and dominated by communists, forced the emperor to abdicate and declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on 2 September 1945.

The post-war status of French Indochina had proven a divisive issue between the Western Allies during the war. Roosevelt himself was initially opposed to the restoration of French colonial rule in Asia. The British, especially Churchill and the Foreign Office, appeared to support the French case for retaining control of Indochina, connecting it with the future of their own imperial territories in South-East Asia.[8] As the conflict progressed, however, Anglo-American policy towards Indochina was allowed to drift, with neither side prepared to discuss the issue with one another.[9] At the Potsdam Conference, the Allies agreed to share immediate post-war occupation duties. It was agreed that French Indochina would be transferred from the American South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) and into Admiral Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command (SEAC) on 15 August 1945 to free-up American forces for the planned invasion of the Japanese home islands. French Indochina was divided at the 16 parallel into two zones of responsibility. In the event of the Japanese surrender, nationalist Chinese forces under Chiang Kai-Shek would occupy the northern half. The southern half, including the French colonial capital of Saigon, would be occupied by British-Indian forces from SEAC. British forces under

[8] Sbrega, *Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia*, p.106.
[9] Thorne, 'Indochina and Anglo-American Relations, 1942-1945', *Pacific Historical Review*, 45:1, 1975, p.96.

the command of Major-General Douglas Gracey finally arrived in French Indochina on 13 September 1945. Over the course of the next seven months the British would facilitate the return of the French, using military force to suppress Vietnamese nationalism and stop the Viet Minh from seizing control in the interim period so that the French could rebuild their presence in Indochina.[10]

Just days after the bulk of British troops were withdrawn from southern Indochina in early April 1946, Lord Killearn first raised the possibility of acquiring rice from the restored French colonial government. Awaiting the results of a French survey of the Indochinese rice stock, Killearn suggested that it may result in a situation when there was more rice available than the French had the capability to handle. In this scenario, Killearn argued that Britain must do all it could to obtain as much of this excess rice as possible.[11] This situation was confirmed a few weeks later when the British were made aware of a surplus of 5,000 tons of rice in French Indochina. Owing to the problems of rice procurement from Siam and Burma, Killearn told London that it was 'essential' that these 5,000 tons were shipped to Malaya and Singapore in May to avoid the 'complete breakdown' of the current rationing system. This surplus would not exceed Malaya's Combined Food Board (CFB) allocation for the quarter and Killearn urged 'immediate action' to acquire this much-needed rice.[12] The French themselves were ready to prepare the rice for shipment to Malaya within the next two weeks. Given the tenuous nature of their restored control in Indochina, the French informed Killearn that the British would have to acquire this rice through direct negotiations with exporters rather than colonial officials.

[10] Details of the British occupation of French Indochina have been recounted in detail elsewhere, for example P. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, (London: C Hurst & Co, 1985); P. Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South-East Asia Command, 1945-46*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); T.O. Smith, *Britain and the Origins of the Vietnam War: UK Policy in Indo-China 1943-50*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and J. Springhall, 'Kicking out the Vietminh': How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indochina, 1945-1946', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:1, 2005, pp.115-130**.** For a more critical reading of British policy see G. Rosie, *The British in Vietnam: How the Twenty-Five Year War Began*, (London: Panther Books, 1970); J. Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government 1945-46*, (London: Verso, 1993), pp.176-203.

[11] F 5265/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 4 April 1946, FO 371/53853, TNA, p.1.

[12] F 7084/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 May 1946, FO 371/53868, TNA, p.1.

Killearn favoured this course, telling London that they were 'far more likely to get more out of this territory' dealing with local businesses than the French Government.[13] Killearn repeated this information to the British consulate in Saigon, detailing his interpretation of the logistics of the situation. In Killearn's understanding, French Indochinese rice was included within the CFB pool from which allocations to South-East Asian countries were made. He confirmed that this extra 5,000 tons would not exceed Malaya's allocation and that unloading facilities at Singapore were available to receive the shipment 'where it was very urgently needed' to maintain the daily rice rations of 3 ounces for Malaya and 4.5 ounces for Singapore.[14]

The British were not the only party interested in French Indochinese rice supplies. On a visit to the territory, Killearn met with senior French colonial administrators to discuss further British access. Discussions appeared initially positive. Killearn was informed by the French that there was 'nothing better' they could do than put the whole of Indochina's exportable surplus of rice at the disposal of the British.[15] There were other nations with claims on Indochinese rice that the French could not ignore, however, namely the United States and United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and French officials used rice as a bargaining chip in their meeting with Killearn to try and draw further British support for their own efforts to restore colonial control in Indochina. In April, the French had asked if the British could provide them with ten tugboats to help restore the shipping capacity at Indochinese ports. The most promising source of these boats was from surplus British military stock remaining in Burma, Malaya, and Singapore. The Foreign Office reported that these early negotiations had been slow, conducted between Mountbatten and staff of the French Liaison Mission attached to SEAC.[16] Acknowledging 'the great debt' they owed Britain for their immediate post-war intervention, the French pursued their enquiry for these ships with Killearn.

[13] F 7085/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 May 1946, FO 371/53868, TNA, p.1.
[14] F 7200/3/61, Killearn to Saigon, 13 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.
[15] F 7304/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 15 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.
[16] F 7304/3/61, Minute by Moss, 18 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA.

Killearn responded that if the British could be assured that the French request would result in a definite increase in rice availability from Indochina, and the tugboats could be spared, he had no doubts that it would receive 'favourable consideration' by British authorities in South-East Asia.[17] Killearn himself supported the provision of these ships, seeing it as bargaining chip in his negotiations with the French over rice. He told the Foreign Office that the French had received 'tempting offers' from the Americans for Indochinese rice to ease the food shortages being faced in the Philippines, which was in the final stages of preparing for independence. To gain favourable access, and thus a source of rice to feed Malaya and Singapore, the British would need to compete with the American offer, having to apply 'some *quid pro quo* pressure' to the French. 'If sale of tugs could go through quickly', Killearn believed, 'it would have an excellent effect' on British efforts to procure rice from French Indochina.[18] The Foreign Office followed up on the progress of the French request in London. Despite a temporary block on transferring the ships to France, a complication stemming from wartime trading with the enemy regulations against the Vichy regime which were still being enforced, the Foreign Office, following War Office approval, agreed to make these ships available to the French as soon as the British offer had been accepted in Paris.[19]

With the issue of external shipping resolved, both British and French eyes turned to issues in Indochina. On 21 May 1946, Ernest Meiklereid, the British Consul-General in Saigon informed Killearn that the French administrators had turned 'more pessimistic' about the amount of rice they expected to reach the capital. The French blamed the low price of rice in Indochina, around £21 per ton, for the difficulties they were facing in purchasing stock for export. Aware of the higher price the British were offering Burmese and Siamese producers, the French suspected that Chinese farmers and merchants in the interior were withholding stock

[17] F 7304/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 15 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA, p.1.
[18] F 7304/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 15 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA, p.2.
[19] F 7304/3/61, Minute by Moss, 23 May 1946, FO 371/53869, TNA.

in the hope of achieving a similar price. To combat this, the French asked the British if they had any intention of establishing a consistent price for rice across all South-East Asia. The response from London was negative.[20] The price of French Indochinese rice had been cheaper than both Burmese and Siamese sources before the war. Ideally, British policy-makers preferred a return to this situation with the price of rice fixed on the same proportional basis as it had been prior to the conflict. The British justified maintaining different prices across South-East Asian territories on the basis that this reflected the unique political situations which existed in each country, and that the prices they were prepared to pay were fixed at a suitable level to improve production whilst keeping rice affordable for local consumers.[21]

Amid these discussions, the French colonial authorities approached Meiklereid with a contract for the 5,000 tons of surplus rice they had made available for the British. They asked for a price of £31 per ton.[22] The British responded with a counterproposal. The Foreign Office presented the French Embassy in London with an offer of £27.11.6 per ton for the rice, equal to the price which Britain was prepared to pay the Burma Government for its new crop.[23] In coming to this position, the Ministry of Food had advised British experts in South-East Asia that it would be unwise to agree with the French offer and pay a higher price than they were for either Burmese or Siamese rice, theorising that this would only lead to further competition and drive up prices throughout the region, endangering Britain's attempt to feed Malaya and Singapore for the cheapest price possible.[24] British policy-makers in Siam felt that the Ministry of Food's proposal to pay £27.11.6 per ton was itself too high. This was nearly double the figure that the British had agreed to pay Siam. Somerset Butler, the British member of the Combined Thai Rice Commission, suggested that, if this development were to become public in Siam, it

[20] F 7635/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 21 May 1946, FO 371/53871, TNA, p.1.
[21] F 7635/3/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 31 May 1946, FO 371/53871, TNA, p.1.
[22] F 7706/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 22 May 1946, FO 371/53871, TNA, p.1.
[23] F 5265/3/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 28 and 30 May 1946, FO 371/53853, TNA, p.1.
[24] F 8286/3/61, Sanderson to Somerset Butler, 28 May 1946, FO 371/53875, TNA, p.1.

had the potential to undermine the progress made to procure enough Siamese rice at a reasonable cost. As he put it, the Siamese Government 'would have substantial occasion for complaint and holders of paddy, particularly Chinese who predominate and who are on the whole informed of world conditions, would inevitably be reluctant to accept official Siamese price [£14.5s per ton]'.[25]

In Butler's opinion, this reluctance would only lead to a continuation of the hoarding issue which British policy had intended to overcome. Again, he suspected that holders of rice in Siam would most likely withhold their stock to in an effort to achieve a price on par with what the British had offered Burma and French Indochina. The consequence of this would be a reduction in the availabilities of rice from Siam 'far greater' than the amounts Britain expected to get out of Burma and French Indochina during the current quarter.[26] Butler accused London of using cheaper Siamese rice to lower the average cost of rice in Malaya and Singapore. Britain's 'apparent willingness' to pay the higher price for French Indochinese rice appeared, therefore, to contradict previous arguments about maintaining the affordability of rice throughout the region.

> Burma, French Indo-China and Siam are all countries with rice economies and in times of free cereal markets are interdependent. To me it seems complete madness for either Burma or French Indo-China to imagine that they can do themselves anything but harm in the long run by establishing a completely false price level now. Scarcity and high prices of agricultural products do not last forever and in my opinion the prices set for Siam are fully adequate to encourage maximum production and export.[27]

Just a few days later, the French informed the British that they were unable to enforce any reduction in price in Indochina. The French insisted that Britain must pay £31 per ton for Indochinese rice. The 5,000 tons were already loaded for shipment in Saigon and were due to set sail in a few days. Despite protests from British diplomats in South-East Asia, London reluctantly gave in to French pressure. On 3 June 1946, the Ministry of Food authorised

[25] F 8427/3/61, Somerset Butler to Sanderson, 6 June 1946, FO 371/53876, TNA, p.1.
[26] F 8427/3/61, Somerset Butler to Sanderson, 6 June 1946, FO 371/53876, TNA, p.1.
[27] F 8427/3/61, Somerset Butler to Sanderson, 6 June 1946, FO 371/53876, TNA, pp.1-2.

Meiklereid to sign a contract with the French.[28] The deal was signed on 7 June and on the following day, 5,000 tons of much-needed rice sailed for Singapore.[29] This whole episode illuminates just how susceptible British food policy in South-East Asia was to external actors. As was the case in Burma and Siam, the British found themselves having to make concessions to holders of rice, in this case the French colonial government, to acquire enough food to feed Malaya and Singapore. The French, by playing on British fears of shortages in their colonial territories, were able to call Britain's bluff and leverage a price on par with what Britain was prepared to pay for Burmese and Siamese rice for shipments from Indochina.

With an immediate deal concluded, British experts visited Saigon to assess the food situation for themselves. Butler informed the Ministry of Food that he found it fairly similar to conditions in Siam. Imports of consumer goods had so far remained below pre-war levels and so local rice producers had little reason to part with their crops. The 'diminishing political or administrative control' of the French colonial government was an added complication. Again, the British received conflicting information about the amount of rice available for export from Indochina. Butler had been told that there was a surplus of around 80,000 tons of rice and un-milled paddy waiting in Saigon for export. The French were 'extremely evasive' about the true amount available. Meiklereid expected them to state that there was much less, around 45,000 tons, for export through the remainder of 1946. Just as had been the case in Siam too, the French looked for the restoration of the consumer goods market to induce merchants to sell to the colonial government. The French predicted consumer goods imports in Indochina would return to pre-war levels in October 1946. For Butler this was too slow. He accused the French authorities of a 'defeatist attitude' and relayed to London that urgent action was now required. He suggested the French colonial government make a declaration that the price of rice in Indochina was too high and express their intention to reduce it, staving off 'the evil day' where

[28] F 8219/3/61, Foreign Office to Meiklereid, 3 June 1946, FO 371/53875, TNA, p.1.
[29] F 8219/3/61, Meiklereid to Foreign Office, 8 June 1946, FO 371/53875, TNA, p.1

the British themselves would have to make this clear. Butler expressed optimism that such a declaration would be possible. While visiting Saigon he had held discussions with French economic officials who expressed that 'an economically sound' price for French Indochinese rice would be around half its present level, i.e., around the same price as Siamese rice.[30] Should such a declaration be made, Butler viewed this as an opportunity for the British to expand their influence over South-East Asia in general, not just over the rice market to keep costs low and its regional territories suitably fed. If the French agreed

> the next course should be to call a round-table economic conference consisting of representatives of Burma, French Indo-China, Siam, Malaya, Hong Kong and possibly China and Borneo with a view to agreeing upon economic aims and levels in this part of the world and co-ordinating economic policies.

The Americans, of course, 'should be in on it in some way', and Butler suggested that the most efficient way to do this would be through the Combined Thai Rice Commission.[31]

Having agreed an individual deal with France for 5,000 tons of Indochinese rice for Malaya in the previous quarter, the British continued to seek further supplies from that colony's stock. The French Government, supposedly dissatisfied with both international arrangements in Washington and also the workings of Killearn's regional organisation, were refusing to include Indochinese rice within the International Emergency Food Council (IEFC – formerly the Combined Food Board) rice pool dedicated specifically for allocation to South-East Asian territories. The Foreign Office predicted that the French refusal would undermine the established international system of food allocation. Indochinese rice, free from IEFC control, could be openly traded, maybe even outside of South-East Asia, leaving the deficit territories for which Britain was responsible facing even greater shortages.[32] The French refusal also risked upsetting the wider South-East Asian rice market, as Indochinese rice would be sold at the world market price. This price was higher than Britain had agreed to pay for rice supplies

[30] F 8864/3/61, Somerset Butler to Sanderson, 15 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, p.2.
[31] F 8864/3/61, Somerset Butler to Sanderson, 15 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, pp.2-3.
[32] F 9824/3/61, Michael Wright to Walter Kahn, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53889, TNA, p.1.

from Burma and Siam and might provide encouragement for rice farmers and merchants in these countries to demand a comparable price from the British. Meiklereid raised the issue with cabinet officials of the French colonial government in Saigon. Here he was told that Saigon had received no information from Paris regarding the functions of Killearn's organisation. This lack of clarity had led them to be suspicious of what they felt was British interference and consequently the French had sought to relay information about the availability of Indochinese rice directly to the IEFC rather than through Killearn in Singapore.[33]

For the upcoming quarter, the French reported an exportable surplus of 25,000 tons of rice to the IEFC. French colonies would have priority on this amount and any quantity left over would be made available for shipment to China only. As in Siam, rice production in French Indochina was dominated by the Chinese. Meiklereid had received information regarding a secret deal between the French authorities and Chinese rice millers for the sale of a further 30,000 tons of rice with the proviso that China would be the sole recipient. Sino-French relations were particularly strained in the wake of the Second World War. China had been responsible for the post-war occupation of northern Indochina. Unlike in the south, where British forces had assisted the return of the French, the Chinese had prohibited French officials from entering the northern sector and had remained there after the occupation had been scheduled to end. Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek had used the occupation as an opportunity to extract rice too, taking the produce to sustain his armies against Mao Zedong's advancing communist forces at home. Despite this, the Chinese were looking to extricate themselves from Indochina. With the communists strengthening their position in northeast China, and tensions growing between the French and Ho Chi Minh, Chiang did not want his troops involved in a possible conflict in Indochina. On the other side, the French still wanted to regain control of northern Indochina, where the Viet Minh had its strongest support, in the belief that this would

[33] F 9918/3/61, Meiklereid to Killearn, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53889, TNA, p.1.

deny their opponents territory and a base of operations. The French decision to provide surplus rice to China then appears to have been designed with these two outcomes in mind: China could withdraw its troops from the north to resist communist advances at home, with a guarantee of continued supply of rice, which would allow the French to restore their control over the whole of their colony. This was raised in the discussion with French colonial officials who, while admitting to the existence of the agreement, defended it as they told Meiklereid that it would only be completed if approved by the IEFC.[34] Foreign Office staff in London expressed cynicism towards the French policy and thought it particularly self-serving. As M.W. Errock stated in early July 1946

> the French motive in excluding FIC rice from SE Asia pool is, while paying lip-service to the principle of IEFC allocations, to use their rice for the purposes of political bargaining, with both internal and external aspects, with the Chinese.[35]

Despite the rationale behind the French desire to control the destination of their rice, the British were still hopeful that they could reach an agreement with Paris which would see some of this surplus shipped to Malaya and Singapore. Harold Sanderson, Director of Rice at the Ministry of Food, told Richard Allen, Head of the Foreign Office South-East Asia Department, that French grievances were not caused by the British but were rather the product of their dissatisfaction with the international system of food control and the workings of the IEFC in general. To overcome this, Sanderson suggested that Britain make a direct approach to Paris to negotiate with the Ministry of the Colonies.[36] The Foreign Office agreed for the need for direct discussions with the French. Sanderson's idea was conveniently timed, coinciding with renewed discussion regarding the proposed formation of an IEFC Sub-Committee on Rice, which would potentially be in London. This body 'would provide a convenient method of negotiation with the French' which was unavailable to British authorities in Washington.[37]

[34] F 9918/3/61, Meiklereid to Killearn, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53889, TNA, pp.1-2.
[35] F 9918/3/61, Minute by Errock, 6 July 1946, FO 371/53889, TNA.
[36] F 10022/3/61, Sanderson to Allen, 5 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, pp.1-2.
[37] F 10022/3/61, Minute by Errock, 9 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA.

Events in Washington, however, took the matter out of British hands. The same day that Sanderson wrote to the Foreign Office, the IEFC Rice Committee discussed the inclusion of Indochinese rice within the South-East Asia pool. Despite Chinese protests and 'confused and acrimonious discussion', the committee agreed that French Indochinese rice should be included in the South-East Asia pool along with Burmese and Siamese supplies and hence allocated in accordance with IEFC recommendations.[38] The separate negotiations with France that Sanderson had suggested were now deemed unnecessary, with the Foreign Office favouring the attendance of a French representative at Killearn's Liaison Officer meetings in Singapore as part of their proposed broadening of Killearn's operation, as discussed in Chapter 2.[39]

Although the IEFC allocated no Indochinese rice to Malaya and Singapore for the period July-December 1946, with exception of the 5,000 tons already agreed, the contribution did improve rice availabilities in South-East Asia. French Indochina added a further 120,000 tons to the IEFC pool, around two-thirds of which was allotted to China. This had a direct effect on rice availabilities for British territories. With a greater proportion of Chinese requirements to be sourced from Indochina, Malaya and Singapore were granted an improved share of rice from Siam, 105,500 tons, for the second half of the year.[40] This improvement pushed the two colonies' total IEFC allocation of rice up to 170,000 tons, only 10,000 short of their declared requirement of 180,000 tons to prevent disease and disorder.[41] Fulfilment of these allocations was still dependent on predicted availabilities being correct.

While this thesis has so far demonstrated that these predictions were usually too optimistic, in the case of the French Indochinese rice shipments to Malaya they were accurate,

[38] F 10090/3/61, British Food Mission, Washington to the Ministry of Food, 5 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.1; The French representative was described as appearing 'inadequately instructed by his Government … rarely able to define its aims and objectives.'
[39] F 10090/3/61, Minute by Errock, 11 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA.
[40] F 11322/3/61, British Food Mission, Washington to the Ministry of Food, 30 July 1946, FO 371/53899, TNA, p.1.
[41] F 11320/3/61, Foreign Office to Killearn, 3 August 1946, FO 371/53899, TNA, p.2.

despite British cynicism. Franklin Gimson, Governor of Singapore, warned London in August 1946 that he did not expect the 5,000 tons France had agreed to deliver to materialise as the French were prioritising shipments to their own colonial territories.[42] Despite Gimson's pessimistic prediction, British officials in Saigon received word that the French had more rice available. They had a shipment of 2,500 tons of rice ready to sail by the end of August, promising that a further delivery of the same quantity would also be available by mid-September.[43] These two shipments were offered to Britain at the same price of £31 per ton as the previous deal. With Malaya and Singapore having cut their rice rations even further, Killearn accepted the new French offer immediately.[44] Despite the extra rice, Killearn was criticised in the Singaporean press for not doing enough.

> For this very small relief the people of rice-starved Malaya will say a very small 'thank you'; it is a help … but when Malaya needs at least 70,000 tons of rice per month, a mere 5,000 tons promised for shipment – not delivery – over the next three weeks is nothing more than Killearn chicken feed.[45]

Geoffrey Thompson, British Ambassador to Siam, also cautioned against making 'further tributes to French generosity' for the extra 5,000 tons.[46] It was no secret that Britain was paying the French nearly double what it was paying Siam for rice, even though Siam was providing Britain with the greater proportion of rice supplies for Malaya and Singapore.

Indeed, the importance of close co-operation between the European colonial powers in South-East Asia remained a key feature of Britain's regional policy. As this chapter has so far shown, this approach was not without its problems. Michael Wright, Killearn's deputy, visited French officials in Saigon shortly after the extra shipment had been made available, finding them 'in an extremely friendly and co-operative frame of mind'.[47] It was in both British and French interests to work together on common problems they shared in the region. It appears

[42] F 11807/3/61, Gimson to Hall, 12 August 1946, FO 371/53901, TNA, p.4.
[43] F 12266/3/61, Meiklereid to Killearn, 22 August 1946, FO 371/53903, TNA, p.1.
[44] F 12316/3/61, Killearn to Meiklereid, 23 August 1946, FO 371/53903, TNA, p.1.
[45] *The Singapore Free Press*, 24 August 1946, p.4.
[46] F 12777/3/61, Thompson to Foreign Office, 2 September 1946, TNA, p.1.
[47] F 13076/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 8 September 1946, TNA, p.1.

from Wright's commentary on the discussions held that the French had yet to appreciate the possible role improving food supply could play in resolving these issues. As Wright put it:

> I then explained to Admiral d'Argenlieu our preoccupation over rice. I told him shortage had now reached point where labour and civil unrest were in the offing at the very moment when political problems were so delicate in themselves … He [d'Argenlieu] fully appreciated impact of famine on the political situation. Communism was after all the greatest danger and failure to improve material conditions would play straight into the hands of Communists.[48]

Associating regional food shortages with the possible spread of communism in South-East Asia appear to have been an attempt by the British to get more rice out of the French. If the security of European colonial rule in South-East Asia was as interdependent as Britain was suggesting, it would be to the benefit of France to keep supplying British territories with rice. Should Malaya fall to communist revolution, it was logical that this movement might spread throughout the region and French Indochina, already facing growing internal unrest inspired by the Viet Minh, would likely be next in line. Indeed, the fact that Vietnamese nationalism had a strong communist element gave the British further rationale to work so closely with the French. Where local nationalism lacked such an aspect, however, as in the Netherlands East Indies, the British were willing to seek collaborative relationships with local independence movements.

Netherlands East Indies

British responsibility for the Netherlands East Indies was acquired in the same way as that over French Indochina, as the territory was transferred from the American SWPA and into Mountbatten's SEAC on 15 August 1945. Also similar to French Indochina, the British would find themselves confronting local nationalists who were determined to gain their independence from European colonial power. The Netherlands East Indies, like Malaya and Burma, was invaded by Japan and remained under Japanese occupation for the duration of the Second World War. The Japanese administration had collaborated with anti-Dutch nationalist leaders, such as Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta, promising them independence and further Japanese support. A

[48] F 13076/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 8 September 1946, TNA, p.5.

declaration of Indonesian independence was encouraged by the occupiers when it became evident that Japan was bound for defeat, with the Japanese authorities even creating a special committee to help with the transfer of power to the Indonesians. The suddenness of Japan's surrender caught all parties by surprise. Aware that any hopes of the promised Japanese support had now gone, Sukarno and Hatta seized the opportunity to declare independence from the Netherlands before the British could re-occupy Java and Sumatra, founding the Republic of Indonesia on 17 August 1945.

British occupation forces, however, were not far behind. An initial detachment of British troops was landed at Batavia (present day Jakarta) to repatriate Allied prisoners of war, civilian internees, and surrendered Japanese personnel on 15 September 1945. It soon became apparent that this initial landing needed more support to deal with the vast numbers of prisoners in Indonesia, and British military forces were built up accordingly. Britain's occupation duties in Indonesia were a far bloodier experience than in French Indochina. From September 1945 to their eventual withdrawal in November 1946, British-Indian troops suffered over 2,000 casualties.[49] On 9 March 1946, Dutch troops were finally landed on Java under the protection of the British, but fighting broke out almost immediately between the Dutch and the Indonesians. Throughout the rest of the month, the Dutch slowly increased the number of soldiers in Java, with the British helping to establish a bridgehead in the west from which the reoccupation of the rest of the island could be supported. In April, the Dutch and the Indonesians reached an agreement to begin treaty negotiations. British-Indian troops were to remain in Java until these talks were concluded and would then be fully relieved by the Dutch from occupation duties.

Against this backdrop of treaty negotiations and a continued British military presence in Java, the nascent government of the Republic of Indonesia approached the Government of India

[49] For literature relating to the British occupation of Indonesia see Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace*; R. McMillan, *The British Occupation of Indonesia: 1945-1946 Britain, The Netherlands and the Indonesian Revolution*, (London: Routledge, 2005).

with an offer of rice. Japanese occupiers had built up large reserves which were now in republican-held areas in Java. In early April, Sutan Sjahrir, the Prime Minister of Indonesia, reached out to Jawaharlal Nehru, head of the interim Indian Government, with an offer of 500,000 tons of this rice in exchange for textiles. Consumer goods were in short supply due to a Dutch naval blockade of the Republic and such a deal would circumvent this. The existence of such a large amount of rice in Java was doubted by the British. Gilbert Mackereth, the British Consul-General in Batavia, had previously ruled out the possibility of the Dutch making a meaningful contribution to the South-East Asia rice pool from its reoccupied territory in the Netherlands East Indies.[50] If Indonesia did, in fact, hold a surplus, Mackereth argued, the Dutch would want it for themselves.

The Indians approached Killearn for further support, asking him to arrange a meeting between Indian government officials and Sjahrir. Killearn told London that the Dutch might object to India agreeing a deal with the Indonesian Republic without their involvement and that removing such a large amount of rice from Java risked famine in Allied-occupied areas. Because of Britain's need to acquire as much rice as possible in the South-East Asia area, however, the sending of an Indian mission to Java should be sanctioned. If rice from Indonesia could be shipped to India, it would lessen the onus on Siam and Burma to provide for that country, consequently freeing up more rice from those two territories which could then be reallocated to Malaya and Singapore. The Foreign Office agreed with Killearn, on the condition that it was made clear to the Dutch authorities in Java that the Indian party were not visiting to negotiate with Sjahrir, but merely to gain a clearer understanding of what the Indonesian offer actually entailed.[51]

[50] F 5349/3/61, Mackereth to Foreign Office, 6 April 1946, FO 371/53854, TNA, p.1.
[51] F 8820/3/61, Addenda to Report on Food Situation in South-East Asia – Chapter IX, 11 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, p.2.

Indian officials arrived in Java in early May, reporting details of their visit back to Delhi. The Indonesians were prepared to make available half a million tons of rice, 400,000 tons to be supplied over the next three months from the existing surplus and the remaining balance from the next harvest due in October and November. This rice would only be supplied on the condition that it was for shipment exclusively to India and would not contribute to the CFB South-East Asia pool. In exchange, India would send a similar value in consumer goods such as textiles and agricultural tools to the Republic. The Indonesians requested that India provide and arrange the necessary shipping as well as asking for a delivery of 350 trucks to move the rice from the interior of Java to the ports. Killearn voiced practical concerns about this request. Firstly, for ease of shipping the rice would need to be exported off the island through Allied controlled ports in Java. This would involve the movement of rice across the established boundary between the Allied occupiers and Indonesian forces. Secondly, the shipping programmes laid down at his Liaison Officer's meetings were designed to meet international allocations set by the CFB.[52] If shipping were diverted to enable the exchange of consumer goods and rice between India and Indonesia, it risked jeopardising Britain's wider food security policy in South-East Asia. The proposed Indo-Indonesia rice deal yet again exposed the precarity of British attempts to reassert its authority in South-East Asia as bilateral diplomatic manoeuvres between the declared Republic of Indonesia and a soon-to-be independent India held the potential to undermine Britain's control over the regional allocation and distribution of rice.

Given the global food situation, and the fact that neither the British nor the Dutch would get the rice for themselves, since the Indonesians had explicitly stated it was reserved for India, the Foreign Office sought to convince the Dutch that it was better to allow the rice to be sent to India rather than remain in Java rotting away.[53] The Dutch responded to Britain's arguments

[52] F 8820/3/61, Addenda to Report, 11 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, pp.3-4.
[53] F 8820/3/61, Addenda to Report, 11 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, p.5.

with the comment that, in facilitating discussions between Nehru and Sjahrir, the British had given credibility to the Indonesian nationalist movement.[54] The Dutch did not believe the sincerity of the Indonesian approach, suggesting that if such a large amount of rice was really in their hands, surely the Indonesians would need it themselves. Dutch authorities on Java had also voiced their objection to the deal. Under CFB allocations, the Allied-occupied areas had been allotted rice from Burma and Siam. It would be 'absurd' to import rice from external sources if these demands could be met from availabilities in Java.[55]

Hubertus van Mook, the Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies, also asked for Killearn's assistance in acquiring a shipment of 20,000 tons of rice to feed Allied areas.[56] Uncertain that the CFB would allow for further export to the Netherlands East Indies over and above their existing allocation, the only alternative was to approach Sjahrir. Even with their commitment to ship half a million tons of rice to India, the Indonesians had promised to supply 11,000 tons a month to the Allied bridgeheads which had not so far materialised. Ruling out further military action to seize the rice by force, staff on the Special Commission suggested that Britain appeal to Sjahrir to help make these deliveries. They suggested that Allied military authorities propose to Sjahrir that either he agree to a temporary extension of Allied territory to bring British and Dutch troops closer to the rice growing areas on Java or allow convoys of British troops to pass through Indonesian territory to collect and deliver rice for the Dutch areas. This risked escalating tensions as extremist factions within the Republic might attack the convoys, however. As the shipments to India had not yet been agreed, it was also suggested that the rice reserved for this purpose could be sent to the Dutch. Britain would provide the necessary coastal shipping to transfer it from Republican ports to Allied ones.[57] The political benefits of this for the Republic of Indonesia would be two-fold. One, it would prove that the

[54] F 8820/3/61, Addenda to Report, 11 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, p.6.
[55] F 8820/3/61, Addenda to Report, 11 June 1946, FO 371/53880, TNA, p.6.
[56] F 8437/3/61, Wright to Mackereth, 5 June 1946, FO 371/53876, TNA, pp.1.
[57] F 8437/3/61, Wright to Mackereth, 5 June 1946, FO 371/53876, TNA, pp.2-3.

purported surplus of rice did exist and, two, it would remove any doubts as to the sincerity of Sjahrir's commitment to help alleviate the regional rice shortage.

The British were left searching for a solution that satisfied all parties, providing both India and the Netherlands East Indies with rice from Indonesia whilst also supplying Indonesia with consumer goods. In mid-June, Killearn organised meetings between the Indian and Netherlands East Indies government at his headquarters in Singapore. Here, the Dutch finally assented to the Indo-Indonesian rice deal, allowing India 'the lion's share' of any exportable surplus of rice from Indonesia to meet its immediate needs. In return, they asked for a guarantee of supplies from either India or South-East Asia producers to meet the requirements of the Netherlands East Indies later in the year.[58] The Indian and Dutch representatives agreed on the terms of the rice deal to be discussed with Sjahrir. Rice exports from Indonesia up to 40,000 tons a month would be divided equally between India and the allied areas on Java. Any rice exported over 40,000 tons would be shipped exclusively to India. From December 1946 to May 1947, the Indian Government (at this stage still under British rule) would then undertake to supply any shortfall on the six-month CFB allocation of 185,000 tons of rice for the Netherlands East Indies to the Dutch. British military authorities in Java would conduct checks on goods being supplied to Indonesia to ensure that India was not providing materiel which might be used to fight Allied troops.[59]

Sjahrir refused to entertain these terms. The original Indonesian offer had been made exclusively to India and he would not allow it to be linked to a scheme which would see the Allied areas on Java receive rice. In response, Allied military and Dutch colonial authorities hashed out new proposals for Sjahrir that would see the Indian and Indonesian government negotiate a separate agreement. India would still agree to replace any shortfall in deliveries to the Netherland East Indies, this time with the caveat that they would only do so provided the

[58] F 9231/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 21 June 1946, FO 371/53883, TNA, pp.1-2.
[59] F 9746/3/61, Minute by Errock, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53887, TNA.

shortfall did not exceed the total quantity of rice India had received from Indonesia. Unfortunately, while Sjahrir agreed to these new proposals, the government of India disapproved. Although pleased that a bilateral deal between themselves and the Indonesians was back on the table, the Indians could not accept the obligation to make up any shortfall in rice shipments to the Allied areas on Java. After all, they said, it was only through India agreeing to exchange consumer goods with Indonesia that this rice had been made available for export in the first place. They could not guarantee that they themselves would even be in a position at the end of the year to sanction the export of rice from India because India was short of rice. The only other imports received, the former-CFB, now-International Emergency Food Council (IEFC) allocation, tended to be consumed immediately upon arrival, so India was unable to build up a surplus to supply other territories.[60] Whilst they acknowledged the rationale behind India's objections, London commented that they made agreement with the Dutch impossible.[61] Britain was left with three choices. Firstly, it could accept the Indian objections and attempt to persuade the Dutch that the requirements of the Netherlands East Indies would be met in full by IEFC allocations. The second option was to try and convince the Government of India that the Dutch requirements would be met by the IEFC and that the obligation to supply the shortfall was a formality of getting the deal accepted. The third choice was to sideline the Dutch altogether. They were, after all, 'trying to get something for nothing' by interfering with the deal and allow negotiations between India and Indonesia to proceed without them.[62]

The mechanics of the shortfall clause created many problems for Britain's regional food security policy. Discussions between Killearn and British military authorities in Singapore resulted in a recommendation being made to the Government of India that they work in close co-operation with Netherlands East Indies representatives on the IEFC and agree to make-up

[60] F 9746/3/61, Hutchings to Killearn, 27 June 1946, FO 371/53887, TNA, p.2.
[61] F 9746/3/61, Minute by Errock, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53887, TNA.
[62] F 9746/3/61, Minute by Errock, 3 July 1946, FO 371/53887, TNA.

any shortfall in deliveries to the Allied areas. Killearn hoped that this would make the Dutch more likely to accept the deal.[63] Yet the Indian Government did not want to work with the Dutch colonial government in the Netherlands East Indies through the IEFC. Joint action with the Netherlands East Indies representatives served 'no immediate purpose and would only complicate and delay the conclusion of the arrangements' and risked putting the Indonesians off, they said. Instead, the Indian Government felt that the best time to inform the IEFC of the deal would be once the rice had arrived in India and the stocks had been counted, giving a more accurate figure to which adjustments could be made. Whatever the final nature of the deal agreed, one fact remained: Given the adjustments to the IEFC allocation that it might entail, final approval would be needed from the Council. Killearn appreciated that while IEFC were 'likely to look askance' at the deal which involved the simultaneous shipment of rice out of the Netherlands East Indies to India and into the Netherlands East Indies from other sources to make up any shortfall, they would accept that this 'abnormal' situation was a result of the political situation between the Dutch and Indonesians in Java and this was 'the only way whereby advantage can at present be taken' of the existing surplus of rice in Indonesia.[64] To 'avoid imputations of dishonesty' from other IEFC members, the Ministry of Food advised that the deal be explained to the Council as soon as possible.[65]

In the course of those June negotiations in Singapore, delegates returned to the possibility of providing Indonesia with more trucks to move rice to the ports for export, as Sjahrir had first requested one month previous. Over the course of the military occupation, Britain had supplied Indonesia with 130 trucks to speed up the repatriation of Allied prisoners of war and removal of surrendered Japanese personnel from Java. These vehicles had not been maintained and were therefore not suitable for the task of moving the amounts of rice from the interior of the island

[63] F 10145/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.1.
[64] F 10145/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.2.
[65] F 10145/3/61, Minute by Errock, 27 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA.

to the ports. Lieutenant-General Montagu Stopford, Mountbatten's successor as Supreme Allied Commander, refused to provide any more trucks on the justification that firstly, they simply did not have enough vehicles to spare, and secondly those that had already been transferred to Indonesia had been used by Republican soldiers in operations against the Allies. Stopford agreed to supply spare parts for the vehicles already in Indonesian possession if a guarantee could be obtained from Sjahrir that the vehicles would only be used to transport rice. He had no objection to the Government of India sending either Indian military transport units and their vehicles or an organisation of Indian civil drivers to Indonesia with the specific purpose to assist in the export of rice and import of consumer goods so long as the British military in Java did not assume responsibility for the safety of the Indian personnel.[66] The Indian Government disagreed with Stopford's plans. They would not sanction the further deployment of Indian troops to Java nor believed that Sjahrir would willingly allow Allied troops to operate in Indonesian territory under British command. The 'best solution' was for the British military authorities in Java to hand over the required number of trucks to Indonesia on a personal guarantee from Sjahrir that the trucks would only be used for transporting paddy and returned on termination of work. The British military would undertake maintenance and repairs of the vehicles so long as their local commanders remained satisfied that Sjahrir's personal guarantee was being adhered to. Despite the substantial risk that the Indonesians would again use these vehicles in military operations against the Allies, the Government of India argued that, considering the serious food shortages in India, it was a risk which should be taken.[67]

British officials in both Singapore and London were critical of this proposal. Killearn suggested that the Indian Government were 'quite indifferent' to the fact that their deal with Indonesia might leave the re-occupied Allied areas short of rice 'provided they scooped the

[66] F 10157/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, pp.1-2.
[67] F 10157/3/61, Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 22 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.1.

lot.'[68] Staff at the Foreign Office suggested that the plan to transfer the trucks to Indonesia was 'so unsound that the IEFC will probably laugh at it.' If the deal were accepted by the Dutch and the IEFC, and India was allowed to come to an agreement with Sjahrir then there was a very real possibility that India would receive rice. London therefore concluded that it was 'best to let India try it on. It is in the long run more important to us that India be fed than that the Allied bridgeheads received food.'[69] The Indian and Indonesian governments exchanged notes on the deal in late July. In return for 700,000 tons of paddy (which would be 500,000 tons of rice when milled) India agreed to supply Indonesia with an equivalent value of consumer goods as well as provide motor transport 'so far as they are able' to assist the movement of paddy in Java.[70] Stopford, however, refused to sanction the transfer of any further vehicles from the military. Killearn was left to communicate this decision to the Government of India. Playing on Wavell's military career, Killearn telegrammed the Viceroy

> [Stopford] regrets he is unable to consent to further transport being given to Indonesia which might and probably on past experience would be used against British troops. Facts are known to British and Indian troops themselves who would object strongly … British forces in Java are very small and barely sufficient to protect the bridgehead around Batavia … Any repercussions from rice deal that would necessitate British moving it or taking action outside of the Batavian bridgehead are therefore clearly unacceptable.[71]

As such, the provision of motor vehicles agreed by India as part of the rice deal risked undermining the Allied military objectives in Java.

The first shipments of rice from Indonesia arrived in Indian ports in mid-August 1946 although the size of the shipment was well below what the Indonesians had promised. A decline in deliveries to India from sources both in and beyond South-East Asia had left the country facing a deficit of over 300,000 tons of rice against its expected allocation. Once again, the Government of India asked London to force the military to release more vehicles in order to get more rice out of Java. The Indians estimated that if the problems of internal transport on the

[68] F 10192/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 11 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA, p.1.
[69] F 10192/3/61, Minute by Errock, 13 July 1946, FO 371/53890, TNA.
[70] F 11222/3/61, Mackereth to Foreign Office, 1 August 1946, FO 371/53898, TNA, pp.1-2.
[71] F 11586/3/61, Killearn to Wavell, 9 August 1946, FO 371/53900, TNA, p.2.

island could be solved, Indonesia's estimated export capacity would be increased from its present 30,000 tons a month up to 150,000 tons. The Indian public were already well-versed in the situation in Siam, in which India had not been free to procure rice itself and was beholden to the allocations set by the IEFC. Sjahrir's offer of 500,000 tons of rice had also been made public.

> If a breakdown for lack of supplies occurred, it will not be possible to conceal the reason why [the] Government of India have been unable to import large supplies from Java, and Indian opinion will bitterly resent what they will regard as unjustified obstruction to a gesture of goodwill from a friendly government made with the object of saving human lives.[72]

The Indian Government accused the British military of preferring the 'starvation of large numbers in India' to the chance that Indonesians would use these trucks to attack Allied troops.[73] The strength of the Indian argument appears to have resulted in a change of heart in London. The British did not want to risk poor relations with India so close to that colony's independence. Attlee himself decided to intervene, as he did many times on his government's policy in India.[74] The Prime Minister overruled the military authorities in South-East Asia and approved the Indian Government's request to transfer British military vehicles to Indonesia.[75]

Attlee's intervention caused great concern in the Foreign Office. The provision of food had become a key feature of their efforts to reassert British authority throughout South-East Asia, demonstrating that Britain was seriously committed to taking the responsibility it had so often claimed in the past to have for its colonial territories. This required Britain to have access to the necessary foodstuffs. A prolonged state of conflict between the Dutch and Indonesians put this access at risk. Negotiations between the warring parties were about to resume, with

[72] F 13941/20/61, Government of India Food Department to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 September 1946, FO 371/53919, TNA, p.2.
[73] F 13941/20/61, Government of India Food Department to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 September 1946, FO 371/53919, TNA, p.2.
[74] K. Harris, *Attlee*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p.362 - Harris states that the Prime Minister 'knew more about India than any other member of his Cabinet … and he intended to ensure that his government's India policy would be his own … Attlee was in fact his own Secretary of State for India.'
[75] COS (46) 144th Meeting, 23 September 1946, CAB 79/52/4, TNA, p.3.

Killearn acting as an intermediary. Britain hoped that these talks would result in a peaceful settlement, with the Dutch agreeing to recognise the Republic of Indonesia as the *de facto* authority on Java. Such an agreement would remove the boundary between Allied and Republican areas, freeing up the movement of rice on the island. On the other hand, should the peace talks fail, say, as a result of the Indonesian's continued use of the trucks for military purposes, the export of any rice from Java to India might become impossible. Aware that they could not overrule the Prime Minister, the Foreign Office decided to stall the Indian Government from insisting on the supply of trucks, at least for a few weeks, until 'the early and most difficult stage' of the Dutch-Indonesian negotiations had passed. Killearn, now in Batavia for the talks, suggested that he could use the provision of vehicles as a carrot in his discussions with Sjahrir to encourage the Indonesian Prime Minister to reach an agreement with the Dutch.[76] The Indonesians had cut the water supply to Allied troops in the bridgehead at Surabaya. With the Dutch due to assume full military responsibility on Java in November 1946, Killearn hoped that he could use the trucks to ease the situation, exchanging them not only to facilitate the shipment of rice to India but also for the restoration of water supplies to Surabaya and the delivery of 11,000 tons of rice to the Allied-held areas. If these two objectives were achieved, it was unlikely the Dutch reaction to the transfer of trucks would be as heated as Britain had originally expected.[77]

Britain was not only mindful of the Dutch reaction to the deal. As regional rice supplies worsened in the autumn of 1946, with deficit territories in South-East Asia receiving just over half of their IEFC allocations in October that year, the Indian Government's attempt to secure more rice for itself outside of the established international system drew complaints from Malaya. For the fourth quarter of 1946, India had been allocated 103,750 tons of rice, over one-third of the estimated availabilities in South-East Asia and nearly double Malaya's allocation of 55,250

[76] F 14227/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 28 September 1946, FO 371/53921, TNA, p.2.
[77] F 14467/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 3 October 1946, FO 371/53923, TNA, p.1

tons.[78] With the Indonesians promising an extra 150,000 tons a month to India, it was no wonder British officials in Singapore observed a 'growing irritation' in Malaya that India was being allowed to bypass international allocations when areas dependent on that system were 'going so lamentably short' of rice.[79] The Foreign Office felt that the Indian focus on Java had been to the detriment of Britain's regional food security policy. The five million yards of textiles that India had sent to Java could have been sent to Burma and Siam instead, offering an inducement for these two territories to improve their export rates and hence the amount of rice available for all deficit territories which drew their supplies from the South-East Asia pool.[80]

Nevertheless, the Indo-Indonesian rice deal proceeded as planned. On 7 October, representatives from the Government of India and Sjahrir exchanged notes on the transfer of 200 trucks from the British, with the Indonesian Prime Minister providing the British military authorities with written assurances that the trucks would only be used for the sole purpose of moving rice and, once this task was completed, the vehicles would be returned to the Allies.[81] On 14 October, the Dutch and Indonesians agreed a ceasefire to ensure that negotiations between the two parties would be conducted in good faith. The Dutch agreed to recognise the Republic of Indonesia as the *de facto* authority in Java, Sumatra and Madura. In return, Indonesia was to join a political union with the Netherlands.[82] With Java now in a state of relative peace, rice did begin to flow out of Republican territory to India, with some 40,000 tons shipped by the end of October.[83] This opportunity was short-lived, however.

While initial export was encouraging, the 150,000-ton monthly shipments Indonesia had promised could be made to India upon receipt of the trucks never materialised. In early January 1947, Killearn reported to London that deliveries had averaged only 7,000 tons per month since

[78] F 14122/3/61, Empson to Foreign Office, 26 September 1946, FO 371/53920, TNA, p.1.
[79] F 14486/3/61, Minute by Whitteridge, 2 October 1946, FO 371/54923, TNA.
[80] F 14486/3/61, Minute by Whitteridge, 2 October 1946, FO 371/54923, TNA.
[81] F 14602/3/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 7 October 1946, FO 371/53924, TNA, p.1.
[82] Tarling, *Britain, South-East Asia and the Onset of the Cold War*, p.170.
[83] F 16790/3/61, Empson to Bevin, 14 November 1946, FO 371/53934, TNA, p.2.

the deal, with India receiving just over 54,000 tons of rice from Indonesia up to this point.[84] In March 1947, the agreement between the Dutch and Indonesians was finally ratified but both sides soon began to accuse the other of reneging on the deal. By mid-July, the possibility of open conflict between the Dutch and Indonesians was increasingly evident. Foreshadowing a resumption of fighting in Java, Dutch officials on the island informed the British that they would no longer be allowing rice ships destined for India to dock in Javanese ports.[85] Just five days later, the Dutch began military operations against Republican territory. Britain attempted to stop the conflict from escalating with Bevin announcing to the House of Commons that an arms embargo had been placed on the Netherlands and that the Dutch were being denied access to port facilities in Singapore to transport weapons and equipment to Java.[86]

Conclusion

Despite notions of post-war European collaboration in colonial areas, the situation in Indonesia highlights some of the issues faced by British policy-makers in South-East Asia. Britain, determined to project itself as a benevolent imperial power, demonstrated by its management of food supply in the region to stave off famine, had to distance itself from the Netherlands once the Dutch resorted to violence to reassert its own control over Indonesia. While British involvement in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies began in similar fashion, the outcome could not have been more different. Having initially supported both the French and Dutch efforts to restore authority over their respective South-East Asian colonies, tension between the returning colonial powers and emerging local nationalist groups soon led to a readjustment of British policy. Considering British concerns over food security in its colonies adds another dimension to understanding why this readjustment happened. In Indochina, it was the French that had proved most willing to co-operate with the British over

[84] F 313/2/61, Killearn to Foreign Office, 9 January 1947, FO 371/63464, TNA, p.2.
[85] F 9673/2/61, Mitcheson to Foreign Office, 16 July 1947, FO 371/63486, TNA, p.1.
[86] House of Commons Debate, 30 July 1947, Vol. 441, cc.434-7.

food matters because their regional policies closely aligned. Despite initial arguments over the price of rice and the contribution of French Indochina to the international system of rice allocation in South-East Asia, Britain and France were able to reach agreements over the supply of rice to Malaya and Singapore. The communist threat posed by the Viet Minh arguably prompted the British to be more accommodating with France, in a co-operative effort to contain the movement and hence halt the spread of communism through South-East Asia. In Indonesia, however, the opposite occurred. It was the local nationalists that demonstrated themselves to be in closer alignment with Britain's regional goals. The offer from the Republic of Indonesia to supply India with rice lessened the demands on the South-East Asia pool, freeing up more rice from Burma and Siam to feed Malaya and Singapore.

Examining British policy towards Indonesia through the lens of food supply shows us that Britain was remarkably pragmatic in its dealings with nationalist movements in South-East Asia. While European collaboration was an ideal outcome, Britain's focus was the defence of its own interests in the region. In the cases of French Indochina and Indonesia, the British were prepared to work with whichever party, European colonialist or Asian nationalist, that enabled them to access much needed food for its own colonial territories as they attempted to restore their authority in the region.

Conclusion

By the end of 1948, the threat of famine in South-East Asia had been significantly reduced. Regional rice production was slowly being restored to its pre-war levels, allowing for greater allocations to Malaya and Singapore. The daily rice ration in the two colonies had been increased to 7.6 and 8.2 ounces respectively. Despite this success, however, British authority in South-East Asia was being challenged in many more ways than through food shortages. If anything, the region was more unstable that at any point since the Second World War. The three main rice exporting countries of Burma, Siam, and French Indochina, were riven by internal conflict. Burma, having gained its independence from Britain in January 1948 as a republic outside of the Commonwealth, descended into a state of civil war based on political and ethnic divisions. In Siam, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, the wartime military dictator, had been restored as Prime Minister following a military coup that had overthrown the Khuang government with whom the British had constructed a positive working relationship. The French in Indochina and the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies were both engaged in brutal conflicts with nationalist independence movements which would ultimately end their colonial rule. And from June 1948, the British themselves were embroiled in a counter-insurgency campaign against communist rebels that, while ultimately successful, resulted in the independence of the Federation of Malaya from Britain in 1957.

British food security policy in post-war South-East Asia thus offers a microcosmic study of the wider trends that were shaping British colonial and foreign policy-making in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. At a time when Britain's relationship with its colonies was increasingly framed in terms of development and metropolitan responsibility, to which the Labour administration added much impetus, the provision of food aid to Malaya and Singapore provided Britain with the opportunity to display a genuine commitment to this new direction in its colonial policy. Much like colonial development policy, however, famine prevention was not entirely altruistic because it was intended to serve wider British objectives

in South-East Asia. Britain hoped to recoup the prestige it had lost as a result of the Japanese occupation, restoring the image of the British Empire amongst both local populations as well as its international detractors, such as the United States. As such, famine relief policy was designed as a way for Britain to reassert its regional authority after the Second World War which was all the more crucial given the importance placed on Malayan natural resources of rubber and tin to Britain's post-war economic recovery.

Also similar to wider colonial development policy, which called for a period of metropolitan rule to guide colonial territories, the British took an interventionist approach in dealing with the rice shortage. A new intergovernmental organisation of the Special Commission for South-East Asia was established in Singapore to manage regional food supplies as well as a corresponding cabinet South East Asia Food Suppply committee in Whitehall. The colonial governments of Malaya and Singapore actively involved themselves in the production, preparation, and distribution of food in the colonies. The British took a much more direct approach in helping to manage its colonial territories in South-East Asia through the post-war food crisis. While this hands-on involvement held the immediate benefit of allowing the British to claim sole control over the region's food supply, this would not last. The United Nations was taking an increased interest in the South-East Asian rice crisis. Its subsidiary bodies of the FAO and ECAFE were growing in influence. The British, unable to resist the internationalisation of food control in South-East Asia, ultimately gave-in to the UN, as regional responsibility for the allocation and distribution of rice was handed over to the FAO.

Internationalism was not, however, the only issue confronting the British, and the authorities in London and in South-East Asia had to consider carefully the regional circumstances they confronted. But taking a regional approach to managing the food shortage exposed British policy-making to nationalist movements which were gathering strength throughout post-war South-East Asia. This thesis has examined this issue through three case

studies, each with their own unique circumstances. In Burma, this thesis has attempted to insert British attempts to acquire rice into the narrative of Burma's decolonisation from British colony to a republic outside of the Commonwealth. With Burma being the second largest rice producer in South-East Asia, the British were forced into a policy of appeasement towards Burmese nationalism, speeding up the process of decolonisation in an effort to remain on good terms with its former colony after independence and hence secure continued access to Burmese rice supplies to feed Malaya and Singapore. This was not always successful, and, as this thesis has demonstrated, there were moments, especially post-independence, in which the British broke from their policy of friendship with Burma and took a more belligerent stance to extract rice.

The same trends are evident in British policy towards Siam, the only independent state in South-East Asia. Britain's rice policy in Siam was initially conceived as reparation for that country's role in abetting the Japanese invasion of Malaya. Initially compelled to provide Britain with 1.5 million tons of rice for free as part of the peace treaty, the Siamese Government (with American assistance) were able to slowly change the situation into one in which Britain was paying for Siamese rice. This continued through the post-war rice shortage as the Siamese played on British fears of starvation in Malaya and Singapore, emphasising that Britain's policy intended to acquire Siamese rice cheaply was in fact detrimental to Siam's ability to meet export obligations. By suggesting that rice merchants were unwilling to sell to the government because of the low price being offered by the British, the Siamese were able to extract concessions from Britain including the supply of consumer goods as well as eventual parity with what Britain was paying for Burmese rice.

The final chapter of this thesis contrasted British policy towards the other two European colonies in South-East Asia, French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. In dealing with nationalist movements in these two colonies, it argues that the British took a remarkably pragmatic approach. In French Indochina, the British supported the returning colonial power.

The French had proven themselves much more willing to trade rice with Britain, in part as a gesture of thanks for British facilitating the French return in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Coupled with this, Indochinese nationalism, especially in Vietnam, had a vocal communist element that the British feared might spread to its own colonial territories and saw the return of French colonialism as a way to oppose this. In supporting the French, the British hoped to simultaneously contain the spread of communism in South-East Asia while also gaining more rice for Malaya and Singapore. In the Netherlands East Indies, the opposite was true. Here, it was the Indonesian nationalists which were prepared to offer the British rice for India. This would allow a greater amount of rice from Burma and Siam to instead be sent to Malaya and Singapore. Despite Dutch opposition, the British offered assistance to the Indonesians to facilitate the export of rice to India because they recognised that supporting the nationalist element here was of greater immediate benefit to them.

The South-East Asian rice crisis offered the British a moment of introspection regarding their colonial and foreign policies. Killearn, having left Singapore in March 1948 at the end of his two-year term as Special Commissioner, retired from the Foreign Service and was finally able to take his seat in the House of Lords. In his maiden address to that House, he spoke of the lessons he had learned from his time dealing with the food shortage in South-East Asia.

> As a matter of fact, "food shortage" is an under-statement; it was an actual threat of starvation … it became clear in the very early phases of the study of this problem that it was possible to cope with it only if we developed common planning and common thought; in other words, a sort of "local regionalism" … It was no good just Malaya and Singapore sitting there and talking about this question; we had to bring others into the orbit … hunger is a common denominator. The empty stomach is nobody's particular intrigue, and on that basis of technical, humanitarian justification we used to meet and help each other out.[87]

Such co-operation, Killearn told his fellow Lords, should serve as an example for the future direction of Britain's regional role which recognised the agency of local actors and sought to promote understanding between South-East Asian states. As he continued:

[87] House of Lords Debate, 13 April 1949, vol.161, c.1209.

> The point I am trying to make is that I believe, on the principle that "great oaks out of little acorns grow," that this was a small example of the application of regionalism in its best form. I have always felt, down in that part of South-East Asia, which should be particularly susceptible to that form of treatment … that that way of handling our common dangers and problems ought to be enlarged and developed … They used to come and sit round the table; they were all intent on discussing the common problem—hunger—and it all worked very well. I hope this system may grow and foster …[88]

Indeed, Killearn's comments were perhaps indicative of the reframing of British imperialism that occurred after the Second World War. Notions of exploitation and metropolitan dominance had been shed, in their place ideas of mutual understanding and partnership between a Commonwealth of Nations.

Both the Commonwealth ideal and the co-operation emphasised by Killearn would come to shape British regional policy for South-East Asia. In January 1950, the foreign ministers of seven Commonwealth countries (Australia, Canada, Ceylon, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom) assembled for a conference in the Ceylonese capital Colombo. The first Commonwealth ministers conference to be held in Asia, discussions focused on the 'practical action which could be taken by Commonwealth countries to meet the menace of Communism by economic action.'[89] Under the initiative of the Australians (Bevin had remarked that the British had already spent nearly £750 million in South-East Asia since the end of the war) an aid programme was created in which the developed Commonwealth countries (Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand) would support development projects through either grants and loans or the transfer of equipment and technical expertise. Reporting the outcomes back to the Cabinet, Bevin told his colleagues that this 'demonstrated to a heartening degree the extent of co-operation between East and West through the agency of the Commonwealth.'[90] The Colombo Plan for Co-Operative Economic Development in South and South-East Asia, as it was initially called, came into force in June 1951. Still in operation today, it expanded well

[88] House of Lords Debate, 13 April 1949, vol.161, cc.1209-1210.
[89] CP (50) 18, 22 February 1950, CAB 129/38/18, p.7.
[90] CP (50) 18, 22 February 1950, CAB 129/38/18, p.1.

beyond the original seven British Commonwealth members to incorporate 26 countries prior to Britain's withdrawal in 1991. The South-East Asian states (in some form) which have featured in this thesis – Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia – all joined within the first decade of the Colombo Plan's inception and remain members some seventy years later. This is, perhaps, the greatest legacy of Britain's famine relief policy in South-East Asia. For in undertaking such a policy in the name of imperial restoration, the British found themselves having to recognise the agency of local actors and rethink their policy to tackle the issue from a collaborative standpoint and not from that of a colonial state handing out orders to lesser powers.

While therefore successful in achieving their immediate objective of preventing famine in South-East Asia, the long-term benefits that British policy-makers held were attendant on that success – the restoration of their regional authority, resistance to communism and anti-colonial nationalism, and the development of colonial economic resources – largely did not materialise. By positioning themselves as the broker for food aid in post-war South-East Asia, the British were fully exposed to the demands of both international organisations and regional nationalist groups which were increasingly anti-imperialist. Thus, in acquiring the food deemed necessary to prevent disease and disorder in Malaya and Singapore and hence maintain British control over its greatest dollar-earning colony, concessions were made to various parties which ultimately worked to undermine British efforts to restore its regional authority. By using a short-term policy of managing rice supplies to overcome the food shortage to achieve their long-term goal of reasserting imperial control in South-East Asia after the Second World War, the British had to contend with opponents that would ultimately spell the end of European imperialism in the region. Hence, in more ways than one, the British truly did find themselves working against the grain in South-East Asia.

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