

Struggling with the Dhofari rebellion

OMANI AUTHORITIES FEAR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SECOND REVOLU-  
TIONARY FRONT.

The discovery towards mid-January of a number of guerrilla networks in the main towns of the Sultanate of Oman has caused considerable concern in Muscat. Sultan Qabus's military advisers assert that they have nipped in the bud an attempt by PFLOAG - who control a whole section of the Dhofar province - to extend their activities to the rest of the country.

Of Marxist-Leninist inspiration, PFLOAG has always claimed that the revolutionary and popular guerrilla which it leads is condemned to asphyxiation if it fails to come out of Dhofar, a marginal and relatively unpopulated area of the Sultanate. Up till now, the Front's efforts to create new revolutionary centres in the country had failed to worry Sultan Qabus's British advisers who estimated that the Dhofari rebellion was a "localised phenomenon" whose success was mainly due to the proximity of the PRSY which serves as a logistic base for the guerrillas.

Have the leaders of PFLOAG finally succeeded in opening a new front inside the Sultanate itself? If precisions given by the Muscat authorities themselves are to be believed, then it is tempting to answer this question positively. The size of the networks recently dismantled seems to have necessitated a large-scale operation which is said to have lasted a number of days. This operation is said to have brought about the arrest of approximately 50 politico-military PFLOAG cadres and the discovery of large arms dumps.

The situation seems all the more disturbing for the Omani leadership because the discovery of these networks - full of large quantities of Soviet, Chinese and Czech military equipment - took place at a time when the government's military offensive (commanded and led by British officers) aimed at liquidating the Dhofar guerril-

las seems to be marking time.

Operations Jaguar in October 71 and Mainbrace in April-June 72 certainly allowed Qabus's soldiers to set foot, for the first time since the beginning of the Dhofari rebellion in 1965, on the strategic hills which dominate the coastal plain north of Salalah. However, they have failed in reaching their main objective, which was to interrupt the transport of arms from the PRSY.

Since he came to power in 1970, Sultan Qabus trebled the military personnel of the Sultanate which has risen from 3,000 to almost 10,000, including 300 British<sup>1</sup>. In the last year, military expenditure has swallowed 60% of state revenue. Precisely because of the war in Dhofar, the new regime which succeeded to that of the despotic Sultan Said bin Taimur, has failed to break out of the vicious circle in which it has allowed itself to be trapped: the costly military struggle against the rebels has worsened the conditions of the population day by day and thus increased the army of discontented, among whom PFLOAG finds its best elements.

An insurrectionary strike in September 71 had shown that only an audacious programme of political, economic and social reforms could weaken the revolutionary organisations and prevent their implantation in the whole Sultanate. But the leaders in Muscat were not up to promoting such policies successfully. The July 70 palace revolution brought about no basic changes in the country's political personnel. Besides, the State's dependence on British military and administrative cadres "loaned" by London prevented it from taking any initiative. Alone among the leaders to suggest a timid step towards reforms Sayed Tariq bin Taimur, Qabus's uncle, was relieved of his functions as Prime Minister in January 1972.

#### An appeal to neighbouring countries.

Since then, Sultan Qabus, who took over the functions of Prime minister, has chosen to fight simultaneously against the Dhofaris and against underdevelopment. With this aim, he has called on the gene-

rosity of Arab oil producing countries in the area, by telling them that they could not remain indifferent to the struggle against the "PFLOAG communists" who, at different times, have asserted their intention to link their activities to those of the liberation movement of the whole Gulf.

Iran has been the first to answer this call, by providing modern military material - including helicopters - as well as pilots and experts in early 1972. Jordan has "seconded" 10 officers to the service of the Sultan's Forces, their duties include training the army and it has opened its military schools to Omanis. For its part Saudi Arabia has offered a financial assistance of £6 million Sterling as well as large quantities of weapons.

Paradoxically, it is Libya, usually the first to help any Arab regime struggling against "communist Subversion" who seems most reticent. According to the Lebanese press, the Libyan leader is concerned by the presence in Oman of Iranian officers, whom he considers to be in the service of imperialism. In fact, the Libyan leader is more likely to be disturbed by the secret treaty which links Great Britain and the Sultanate of Oman.

In these circumstances, the noise and unusual publicity given in Muscat to the PFLOAG networks - at the very moment when a military Libyan delegation was visiting Oman - could have had the secondary aim of persuading the Tripoli leaders that the seriousness of the communist danger in the Sultanate warrants certain compromises with anti-imperialist principles.

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1. In Oman there are three categories of British officers: a) officers and technicians under contract (mainly former RAF pilots and mechanics) who are real mercenaries; b) "Seconded" officers and n.c.o.s who depend simultaneously on the Sultan and the British Ministry of Defence; c) units of the Special Air Services regiment, an elite British military force involved in delicate operations, whose presence in Oman has the official aim of instructing the Sultan's Forces.