

SEAU: Is It A Beginning?

By J. C. CRAIG

IF the recent seven-nation* gabfest in Baguio achieved anything, this did not exceed that which the conference set out to do at the start. Fanfare and publicity notwithstanding, the average Filipino was unimpressed by the Southeast Asia Union conference; the language of diplomatic double talk lay beyond his ken. At first Juan had a vague idea the Baguio conference was called to lay the groundwork for the timely solution of the problems that currently beset the peoples of Southeast Asia. But the deliberations that lasted five days barely touched those problems; from the standpoint of a truly valid purpose the conference appeared, to the end, a masterpiece of evasion.

After the conference ended, the chairman, Dr. Carlos P. Romulo came down to Manila and told a National Press Club gathering that if there was one thing the conference proved, it was the oneness in the spirit of Asia and the Asiatics' desire for peace and mutual understanding. The veteran Philippine diplomat who had had the experience of wielding the gavel often at the United Nations, admitted the rather unusual fact that, unlike usual international conferences, the SEAU meet had no prepared agenda. In fact, the nations that sent representatives to the conference were not apprised of the exact nature of the conference, and it goes without saying that no delegate was fully authorized to commit himself or his home government to any specific issue. The SEAU confab amounted to a mere feeler for the purpose of finding out if the seven nations could be brought together. As it did not set out to accomplish anything specific, it did not, it could not achieve any specific results. The broad conclusions grandiloquently aired afterward at luncheons and dinners, many believe, could have been arrived at without resorting to all the stage show and the expense, the meaningless pomp, and without broadcasting the utter emptiness of the whole undertaking. A more down-to-earth approach to the real questions confronting these nations in common would have forged the real bond of mutual interest and understanding. A more scientific and sincere inquiry into the problems that trouble Southeast Asia would have earned the respect of the nations for the country that played host to the conferees.

What are the real problems of Southeast Asia?

The half century finds the teeming regions of once abjectly colonial countries enjoying a measure of political freedom. China has boldly rejected the Kuomintang oligarchy because of its unholy alliance with the Imperialist powers of the West. India, by flexing her intrinsic strength, has shown the proud Englishmen the futility of further foisting English suzerainty over a hardy and populous nation. Burma has attained its independence, and its neighbor, Indo-China, currently seeks to keep the freedom it had won from the Japanese but now threatened by French colonialism. Siam, which had always been anomalously independent, sways away from the old British influence in response to the blandishments of the American dollar. Malaya is in a ferment as it strives to throw off the yoke of foreign rule. Wily Indonesia has successfully played

American cupidity against the old interest of the Dutch in order to bring American pressure and win sovereignty from the Netherlands. The Philippines, once betrayed by the Spaniards to the Americans, finally finds itself politically free but still economically a slave to the whimsies of certain foreign capital interests. The peoples of Southeast Asia are reportedly realizing more and more everyday that it is not as much the political freedom that counts—the pride of having one's flag wave sovereign against its own sky—as the attainment of other freedoms yet to be fought for and won.

Six hundred million Orientals have come to know they must continue the struggle—not merely against foreign rulership but against poverty, disease, fear, and backwardness. The struggle has something to do with peeling off the old oppressive systems of land ownership and labor exploitation. Such conditions as uneven distribution of wealth, poor education, one-sided culture, lack of technology, obsolete social customs and outmoded practices must be done away with in order to bring the peoples of Southeast Asia abreast with the advanced "civilized" world. To achieve success in these aims, the peoples of Southeast Asia must know who are their enemies, who are those that conspire to perpetuate these odious conditions that must be destroyed. As long as the true identity of this real enemy remains undetermined, the peoples of the East cannot achieve freedom from fear.

It is an era of changing social systems. The development of social modes of production has shown that old modes of capitalist enterprise are no longer adequate, that they are gone never to come back. Progress has demonstrated that industry must be organized and regulated in order to prevent dislocations and to fit worldwide production to the wants of the world's limited population. No longer can capitalist countries produce too much because the population of the globe can only buy so much; no longer can imperialist nations vie madly with each other for world markets because even these places have been developed and are producing their own commodities. As capitalism grows, the monopolists grow to abnormal proportions, thriving on the carcasses of their weaker competitors. And as wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, the real struggle is laid bare... that of the conflicting interest between the powerful wealthy minority and the exploited working class majority. In Southeast Asia, this class distinction is even more sharp; the ruling class is allied with the imperialists of the West and is far removed from the exploited class of the peasantry and workers. The wealthy live in palaces; the poor manage to live in unsightly hovels on land they can not even call their own.

The fate of Southeast Asia hangs on the decisiveness of this vast but exploited majority, and two rival camps are vying for its loyalty. Capitalism promises a rosy future through extension of technical assistance to backward areas and under the continued tutelage of capital. Communism seeks to introduce a new system wherein production is not made for profit but to satisfy the wants of

* Australia, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Siam.

the means of production, Communists tell the exploited everyone. As long as the people themselves do not own peoples of Southeast Asia, they will never really be able to obtain all their needs; the capitalist owners will produce commodities more for the purpose of profit than for the purpose of meeting the wants of the people. Capitalism, on the other hand, would warn the people against Communism because of the possible consequences of regimentation. In Southeast Asia, therefore, the problems may be of two kinds—the problems facing the governments and the problems facing the peoples. The governments are concerned, not only with looking after the general interests under its current ideological basis, but also with the preservation of this basis. The peoples are concerned more about their own plight and would, in the end, adopt that ideological basis that assures them a more thorough enjoyment of freedom and economic prosperity.

The particular situation in Southeast Asia places non-Communist if not anti-Communist governments on the defensive against a militant Communist menace. Big and populous China proved no match against this compelling ideology; the once powerful Kuomintang knuckled under the sweep of a people's rebellion under Communist leadership. Indo-China under Communist leadership has almost driven the French colonizers to the sea. Everywhere in Southeast Asia are Communists propagating their new doctrine. They profess to show that democracy operates on a much better way under a new social order that must necessarily require the replacement of the one existing. It is this direct menace to the Southeast Asian governments that is an immediate and paramount problem, but was ignored altogether by the Baguio conference. In its stead the conferees talked of economic and cultural ties notwithstanding the fact that this economy and culture may even demand revision and improvement to be of real benefit to the hard-up population of the entire region.

The background of the SEAU shows that it had more concrete aims in the beginning. As first conceived by the President of the Philippines, it was inspired by the North Atlantic Pact, a mutual defense agreement among Western European nations with the United States against a possible aggressor (Soviet Russian and Communism). When it was discussed by the President and China's visiting Kuomintang chief, Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek, it had the makings of a Pacific Pact for mutual defense against the rapid advance of Communism in the Far East. However, when the United States, in order not to be drawn into an openly belligerent attitude against the Soviet Union, refused to be drawn into an avowedly anti-Communist alliance, the pact idea was abandoned and the aims toned down. It was more or less the consensus of every military observer, anyway, that no defense pact would be practical in the Pacific without American backing. After Britain recognized Communist China, and Commonwealth bloc of nations appeared more lukewarm than ever to the proposal of banding together into a regional alliance which was understood by everyone as practically, if not openly, inviting Communist hostility. As the real motivations of the union frittered away, there remained still one obvious consideration—that of saving face—that the union conference at least see realization. No task was more difficult to perform for even such a world-famous diplomat as Dr. Romulo as the job of "sounding off" several Far East and Pacific nations on the possibility of holding a "union conference" in Baguio. The papers reported the vacillating attitudes of each country; even the official publicity changed the "Pacific" nomenclature to "Southeast Asia" to suit it and make it more acceptable to the Southeast Asian nations. And even when seven countries responded to the call, it was only when there was nothing specific to discuss and no specific commitment to adopt.

And yet, there are a number of problems in common among those that sent representatives to the conference. First, naturally and obviously, is the problem of meeting the Communist threat. Other problems are, say, modernization of agriculture, expansion of industry, the need for investment and finance capital, the need for technological assistance, the need for removing disadvantageous trade barriers, the need for solving unemployment and for bettering labor-management relations, etc. . . . Was it mutual distrust that prevented the conferees from touching on these matters? Was it lack of confidence in their respective ability to pool together their resources? If there was "oneness" in spirit, it was conspicuously unimplemented. The SEAU began as a regional meeting on a broad sense—much like a tea party—and ended that way. It could have been a beginning of a fruitful alliance. What it practically amounts to and might amount to is that it can serve as a willing dummy or framework for a more courageous plan, military perhaps—with the aid of the United States, or of a truly economic and cultural program — with the active give-and-take participation of the member countries.

A number of comments have been made on the true character of the Baguio meeting. There are those that say the United States was behind the stage show, that Dr. Romulo was guided by instructions from the State Department, that the whole affair was to test the temper of the Southeast Asian countries for a more concrete move later on the open initiative of the United States Government. But these comments, for want of substantiation, must remain under the classification of gossipmongering. In fact, there was no American representative, observer, nor even mere technical adviser at the conference. The comments of the American press were varied although all were unanimous in the opinion that the Southeast Asian nations are not "ready" yet for a mutual defense pact or even a regional alliance. The HERALD TRIBUNE said the conference "pointed the way toward closer integration of policy among Southeast Asian countries . . ." but added that "the idea of a Pacific Union, so widely mooted, is still far from realization. Obviously the independent countries of Southeast Asia are not yet ready for it." Hongkong papers were more sarcastic; the STANDARD said, "as expected, the conference brought no results" while the CHINA MAIL commented on a caustic vein, "a spate of words cannot disguise the fact that the Baguio conference produced nothing but a spate of words."

Perhaps the more biting comments come from many Filipinos themselves, citizens who long since lost faith in the grandiose promises of the government and the broad aims outlined by government leaders. Heard in the street were such remarks as, "it was good publicity for the Philippines, but too expensive" or "it was publicity all right, but publicity for a desperate Quirino administration seeking to recover the lost confidence of the people." And those who said, "how could the good Dr. Romulo have allowed himself to be so used and underrated?"

In spite of the sarcasm and the skepticism, the SEAU meet nevertheless pointed to one prospect — that for the Philippines it can be the beginning of a more assertive leadership. The real situation at present in the Philippines is not dissimilar to that obtaining in other countries of Southeast Asia. An economic if not political anarchy has reigned since the end of world war hostilities. The abnormal dumping of American dollar aid into these countries that were in need more of machinery, technical development rather than borrowed purchasing power only plunged these countries after four years into the most desperate economic crises. The dollars had long since returned to the United States in payment of American gasoline, clothes, foodstuffs, luxuries, automobiles, etc. . . . The abnormal conditions

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lently stride on, his head bent slightly away from the coffin on his shoulder, a stout pick gripped in his free arm. She stood still watching him until he was at last swallowed in the blue in the distance. After a while, she turned and went up the stairs into the hut, and seated herself at the open window.

It was well late in the afternoon when he reached the end of his journey. He laid down the coffin beneath the shade of a tree, and after resting for a minute, went forth to search for a spot in which to dig the grave. It was not long before he came to a level space where the grass grew lush and tall and thick.

He began immediately to dig with the pick. His limbs were stiff and after the long trek, but he struck the earth hard underneath the dense deceptive growth and soft upper layer with swift, measured might. Soon he found himself deep in his breast in a hole large as to allow his body to turn freely in a circle.

He clambered out of the hole, casting the pick to one side, and went forth to fetch the coffin. Back at the hole with the coffin, he circled circled the rope he had brought along thrice round the coffin. In this fashion he lowered it gently into the grave. The end of the rope in his hands he threw in after the coffin.

Perspiration broded his forehead and trickled over his eyes. He paused to wipe it away with his hand. His breath came fast. He waited until he breathed easier, and blew upon his sweating chest.

At last he filled the grave with the loose earth, shoving it with his hands and feet. He squatted himself down even the better to do so, in large lump masses. Then he picked up the clods that remained and which had eluded his search. The mound piled high. This he stamped to level with his feet and the pick.

Finally, he gathered the grass that he had dug up and tossed to one side, and carefully placed them over everywhere the earth showed sign of the grave, as if the earth has never been before disturbed.

The sun was in the horizon in a magnificent crimson flame. He rose and flung the pick onto his shoulder. His legs swung wider, even faster now than he did before when he came. Soon the cool twilight breezes fanned his face and arms and night came on with the promise of starlight.

"I am glad you are back", the woman welcomed him as he mounted the stairs of the hut.

He smiled at her in return.

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produced a new class of *nouveaux riche* from a motley crowd of former racketeers and political opportunists. As their stuccoed and towered mansions rose, the slums increased and the mass of the people were subjected more and more

to their ruthlessness. The new ruling class of plunderers fawned upon the cupidity of foreign interests to win them as an ally in further stabilizing their usurpation of power and authority. But as the oppressiveness of this class increased, the corresponding decadence set in and those very powers it once courted turned away from it. Even imperialist interests that gladly used it as a willing tool before, now think of discarding it for another set that still retains some confidence of the people.

It is in playing a leading role in ridding the Southeast Asian countries of these unworthy elements, it is in leading the move for a more sincere attention to the wants and human interests of the Southeast Asian masses, it is in showing the courage that a Southeast Asian nation is capable of in the face of both internal and external threats that the Philippines can truly demonstrate dynamic leadership and show that the SEAU, barren as it was, can be an auspicious beginning.

Report Of The ...

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Forces of an Allied Nation.

- (9) Authorization to reopen for one year the date for filing claims for personal property lost by military personnel under the Military Personnel Claim Act of 1945.

Among the other recommendations was one that the Veterans Administration make scientific studies of former prisoners of war to determine the degree of permanent health damage incurred as a result of malnutrition and injuries sustained during imprisonment. It is believed that the findings would be applicable also to civilian internees, although in different degree.

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