

France-Tunisian Relations, December 1957 - February 1958. - French Protest at Border Incident.

A major crisis in the relations between France and Tunisia arose on Feb. 8 when French aircraft bombed the Tunisian frontier village of Sakhiet-Sidi-Youssef, which, the French authorities alleged, was being used as a base by the National Liberation Front (F.L.N.) for raids into Algeria and attacks on French aircraft. As a protest against the bombing, which caused a large number of civilian casualties, the Tunisian Government recalled its Ambassador in Paris, forbade all movements by French troops stationed in Tunisia, demanded their evacuation, and appealed to the Security Council to condemn the French "aggression." Following the decision of the French and Tunisian Governments on Feb. 17 to accept an offer by the British and U.S. Governments to use their good offices to bring about direct negotiations between them, the Security Council postponed consideration of both the Tunisian complaint and a French counter-complaint alleging Tunisian assistance to the Algerian rebels.

Negotiations conducted through the Anglo-American "good offices" mission continued during the next seven weeks. A number of concessions were made by President Bourguiba, who—in view of the French refusal to discuss Algeria—eventually agreed (i) to exclude the Algerian problem from the scope of the talks; (ii) not to insist on the immediate evacuation of the French naval base at Bizerta; and (iii) to accept neutral supervision of the airfields hitherto occupied by the French forces. The President refused, however, to co-operate with the French authorities in measures for the control of the Algerian frontier, as had been proposed by France. The French Government decided on April 12 to accept these concessions, coupled with the evacuation of French garrisons (except that at Bizerta) from Tunisia, as a basis for the resumption of direct negotiations. On April 15, however, this policy was rejected by the National Assembly, whereupon the Prime Minister, M. Gaillard, tendered his resignation.

Details of these developments are given below under cross-headings.

After consultations in Paris, the French Ambassador in Tunis (M. Gorse) returned to Tunisia on Dec. 21 for discussions on the questions at issue between the two Governments. On his arrival he handed to President Bourguiba a letter from the French Government emphasizing the necessity of finding a speedy solution to the problem of Tunisian aid for the Algerian insurgents, which, the letter stated, "is at the root of most of our past difficulties." Although President Bourguiba did not reply to this message, he stated in a broadcast on Jan. 9 that if the French forces evacuated all their bases in Tunisia, except Bizerta, Tunisia would enter into an alliance with France without insisting on the termination of the Algerian war as a condition for such an alliance.

Relations again deteriorated, however, when a French patrol was ambushed by Algerian rebels on Jan. 11 near the Algerian-Tunisian border, about four miles west of Sakhiet-Sidi-Youssef; 16

French soldiers were killed and four taken prisoner. M. Gorse immediately lodged a strong protest and demanded the release of the prisoners, who were alleged by the French authorities to have been taken to Tunisian territory. The French protest was rejected on Jan. 14 by the Tunisian Government, which claimed that the Tunisian authorities had taken precautionary measures against any infiltration by the belligerents into Tunisian territory, and denied that the insurgents had withdrawn into Tunisia with their prisoners.

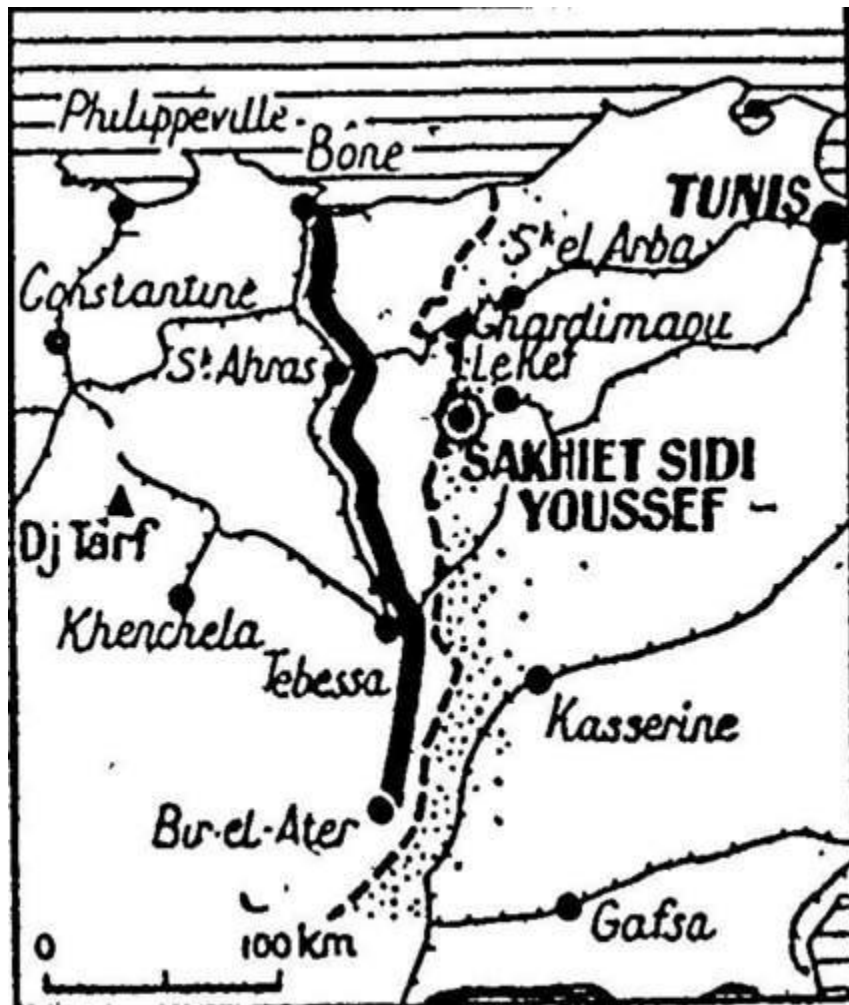
M. Gaillard decided on Jan. 15 to send his military advisor, General Buchalet, to President Bourguiba with a message threatening to break off negotiations if the prisoners were not released. When General Buchalet arrived in Tunis on Jan. 16, however, President Bourguiba refused to receive a military emissary in uniform, on the ground that his presence was an "act of intimidation"; he offered, however, to meet M. Larché (M. Gaillard's *chef de cabinet*), who had accompanied General Buchalet. This offer was rejected by M. Larché, and the two envoys returned to Paris on the following day with M. Gorse. After a representative of the International Red Cross had visited the four prisoners on Jan. 30, by arrangement with the F.L.N., and had confirmed that they were in fact in Algeria, President Bourguiba proposed on Feb. 6 that M. Gorse should return to Tunis and that negotiations should be resumed.

On the morning of Feb. 8 a force of 25 French bombers, fighter-bombers, and jet-fighters raided Sakhiet-Sidi-Youssef (about half-a-mile from the frontier), dropping bombs and rockets for about an hour and machine-gunning the streets, which were crowded for the fortnightly market. It was subsequently announced that 69 people, including 11 women and 21 children, had been killed; that 180 people, including women and children, had been injured; and that over 100 houses, about 40 shops, and a number of public buildings had been destroyed or severely damaged, including the National Guard post, the police barracks, and the Customs and Post Office buildings, as well as buildings belonging to a mine on the outskirts of the village and a neighbouring school and hospital; most of the child casualties had occurred at and around the school. Two Red Cross lorries bearing supplies for Algerian refugees had also been destroyed.

A statement issued by the military authorities in Algiers on Feb. 8 alleged that French military aircraft had been fired on by anti-aircraft batteries in the Sakhiet area on Jan. 30 and Feb. 7; that the Tunisian authorities had been warned on Feb. 7 that another such incident would lead to reprisals; and that the raid had immediately followed a third incident early on Feb. 8 in which a French aircraft was hit. Military sources stated afterwards that 84 incidents had occurred on the Tunisian frontier since July 1, 1957, of which 26 had taken place in the Sakhiet area, and that 80 French aircraft had been fired on, 11 hit, and two forced down. M. Chaban-Delmas (the French Defence Minister) declared on Feb. 8 that the French aircraft had only exercised their "right of legitimate self-defence against anti-aircraft forces installed on Tunisian territory"; in a speech on the following day he described Sakhiet as "a nest of rebels and murderers."

General Salan, the French C.-in-C. in Algeria, stated in a report to the Ministry of Defence on Feb. 9 that aerial photographs and the reports of pilots taking part in the raid showed that Sakhiet itself had suffered "very little damage" and that "nine-tenths" of it was undamaged. Only military objectives had been attacked, including the *gendarmerie* and Customs posts, the former French barracks now used by the rebels in their attacks on French aircraft, and a rebel camp which was known to be installed at the nearby mine, with its buildings and four gun emplacements. It had

become known from prisoners' statements that the school hit was an abandoned building which had served as a command post for the rebel staff. The pilots, he added, had denied seeing any Red Cross vehicles in the village.



The Algerian-Tunisian border, showing electrified barrier on the Algerian side. (*Le Monde*, Paris)

This account, however, was in important respects contradicted by reports given independently by Swedish and Swiss delegates of the League of Red Cross Societies, who entered Sakhlet immediately after the raid; by a party of French journalists (including representatives of *Le Figaro*, *France-Soir*, *L'Erpress*, *France-Observateur*, *L'Humanité*, and the French National Broadcasting Organization) who visited the village on Feb. 9; and by diplomatic representatives of Western and Arab countries who were taken there by the Tunisian Government on Feb. 10. These reports confirmed the large number of women and children killed and injured, the damage done to houses and shops, in addition to public buildings, and the destruction of Red Cross lorries. Mr. Lewis Jones, the U.S. Ambassador, stated afterwards that Tunisian accounts of the bombing were not at all exaggerated; Mr. Dearden, secretary to the British Embassy, estimated that three quarters of the buildings in the village had been damaged; and M. Heibling, a Swiss

Red Cross representative, expressed the opinion that it was impossible for the pilots not to have seen the red crosses on the lorries.

On being informed of the raid President Bourguiba summoned a Cabinet meeting, which decided to recall the Tunisian Ambassador in Paris, M. Masmoudi; to forbid all French troop movements unless approved by the Tunisian authorities, in order to prevent clashes with the civil population; to demand the evacuation of all French forces from Tunisian bases, including Bizerta; and to appeal to the U.N. Security Council. President Bourguiba announced these decisions in a broadcast on the evening of Feb. 8, in which he appealed to the population to remain calm.

"After today's raid," he said, "it seems very difficult for friendly relations to continue between Tunisia and the French Army, and still more difficult to envisage a joint defence plan or any co-operation whatever between the Tunisian and French armies... I ask you to remain calm, to keep watch over the security of our territory, and not to forget that we are all responsible for the lives and property of the Frenchmen in Tunisia. Our dispute is with France and the French Army, not with the Frenchmen living in our midst... We must continue to stand for peace, to believe in peace, and to defend it, so that the war may not spread, as a large number of military leaders and even civilians in responsible positions would like it to do." After stating that the Government gave the problem of the evacuation of French forces "absolute priority over all others," President Bourguiba continued. "It is no longer possible that an army which mocks at our national dignity after two years of independence should be tolerated any longer in Tunisia. The battle for the evaluation of Tunisian territory is beginning. We mean this evacuation to be complete, including Bizerta. We can no longer have any confidence in an army which has just given us so bloody a demonstration of its mentality."

A memorandum giving details of the raid and of the Tunisian Government's measures was handed to the U.N. Secretary-General, Dr. Hammarskiold, on Feb. 10 by M. Mongur Slim, the Tunisian representative at the U.N. After describing the raid as "armed aggression by France against Tunisia, in flagrant contradiction of the spirit of the U.N. Charter," the memorandum stated that, "coming after some 50 other violations of the Tunisian frontier committed during the last few months by French troops, resulting in numerous other dead and wounded among Tunisian citizens, this new violation assumes the character of a premeditated action on the part of France and constitutes an act of particular gravity, seriously affecting relations between France and Tunisia and threatening international peace and security."

Before returning to Tunis, M. Masmoudi visited General de Gaulle, whom he afterwards described as "the incarnation of the real conscience of France," and Cardinal Feltin, the Archbishop of Paris. When he left Paris on Feb. 10 a number of prominent public figures visited him to express their sympathy, including M. Mendès-France, M. Francois Mauriac, and three left-wing Socialists, M. Daniel Mayer, M. Robert Verdier and M. Alain Savary.

In Tunis, the Constituent Assembly passed a resolution on Feb. 10 condemning the attack and proclaiming the will of the Tunisian people to stand behind President Bourguiba in the defence of the country. It also decided to send an inquiry commission to Sakhiet and to suspend examination of the draft Constitution until further notice, so that the deputies could return to their constituencies in view of the national emergency.

In accordance with the Tunisian Cabinet's decisions, the 15,000 French troops in Tunisia were strictly confined to their camps. Road blocks were erected by the Tunisians to prevent French troop movements, telephone communications between the camps and the outside world were cut off, and food supplies and services by local authorities stopped. At Ferryville, near Bizerta, several thousand Tunisian workers employed at the large French arsenal were stopped by Tunisian police from going to work, and on Feb. 10 the Tunisian Government announced that French warships already at Bizerta would be allowed to leave, but that any which tried to enter the harbour would be fired on; if necessary the canal leading to the base would be blocked. On Feb. 14 the Constituent Assembly passed a law abrogating the extra-territorial status of Bizerta, which had hitherto been a French naval prefecture and as such had been exempted from Tunisian taxation.

The Tunisian Government also requested the French Embassy on Feb. 11 to close five of the seven French consulates in Tunisia. Local governors were empowered to expel from their districts French residents whose presence was considered likely to cause incidents, and by Feb. 25 over 600 French settlers had been removed from the frontier areas.

In a statement to the National Assembly on Feb. 11, M. Gaillard defended the bombing of Sakhiet, which, he alleged, was being used as a military base by the F.L.N.; he revealed that the decision to carry out the raid had been made by the local commander on his own initiative. M. Gaillard was replying to a number of questions by Radical, Socialist and Communist deputies, all of whom had strongly condemned the attack.

"After the events of Sakhiet" [i.e. the incident on Jan. 11], he stated, "M. Bourguiba persuaded the F.L.N. to withdraw from its positions on the Algerian frontier. But a few days later they returned, notably to Sakhiet, which had been an active centre of the rebellion for some months. An old lead mine and its buildings 1,500 metres from the frontier provided a permanent shelter for several hundred *fellaghas*. In addition, heavy anti-aircraft machine guns installed in small forts systematically fired on French reconnaissance aircraft protecting our convoys. In the village of Sakhiet two watch-towers were occupied by the rebels, and in normal times the F.L.N.'s services and camps were installed side by side with those of the Tunisian troops. All our prisoners, up to the last few days, have confirmed the presence of two units of *fellaghas* at Sakhiet. The events of Jan. 11 had confirmed the importance of the F.L.N. infiltration. On our side our troops were permanently on the alert."

"Our airmen had strict orders not to cross the frontier," he continued, "but on numerous occasions they were fired on in the Sakhiet zone. 18 incidents of this kind occurred between Sept. 18 and Feb. 8, and two aircraft were forced down. Each time we protested to the Tunisian authorities, but without result. Twice, on Oct. 1 and 2, 1957, our aircraft were fired on from Sakhiet. In recent weeks incidents have become more frequent. On Feb. 7 the commander of the French frontier force warned the commander of the Tunisian post that we should be obliged to retaliate if any similar incident occurred. The very next day, on the morning of Feb. 8, an aircraft was fired on from Sakhiet and forced to land. The local command retaliated. B-26 bombers were to destroy the F.L.N. installations at the mine, and Corsair fighters were to destroy the two anti-aircraft machine-gun posts in the village..."

"For months the present Government and the previous Government have authorized the Army to use its right of legitimate self-defence," M. Gaillard went on. "Hitherto it has done so only with the greatest restraint. The latest events, if they have resulted in the destruction of an important centre of *fellaghas*, have unfortunately caused some civilian casualties, but all the information which has reached me indicates that the majority of the victims belong to *fellagha* units. No-one on our side deliberately intended to attack civilians. We deplore that we have not been entirely successful, but whose is the moral responsibility for this deplorable result? Tunisia has more or less voluntarily adopted an attitude of belligerence towards us. There is no international law which compels a State which is being attacked from its neighbour's territory to put up with it indefinitely. For months our military units have shown a restraint of which few armies would have been capable. At Sakhiet they hit back, with the aim of attacking military objectives which represented a grave and permanent danger. Only the enemies of our country can believe that our retaliation had any other object."

M. Deixonne (Socialist) called for an assurance that no operation on such a scale would take place in future without the Government's consent, he asked whether compensation would be offered to the civilian victims of the raid, emphasizing that the Socialists' vote on the motion of confidence which the Government had proposed would depend on the Prime Minister's reply. **M. Gaillard** replied that the more dangerous and complex the situation on the frontier became, the more closely would the Government keep watch over it; the question of compensation was bound up with that of negotiations with the Tunisian Government, but "the hypothesis formulated by M. Deixonne could not be excluded *a priori*."

A resolution which, while regretting the civilian casualties at Sakhiet, expressed confidence in the Government was carried in the early hours of Feb. 12 by 335 votes to 179, with 49 deputies abstaining.

The Government was supported by the Socialists and Social Republicans, the majority of the M.R.P., R.G.R., *Gauche Démocratique* (dissident Radicals), U.D.S.R., and Independent deputies, and 21 of the Radicals. The opposition consisted of 148 Communists and *Progressistes*, 19 *Mendésiste* Radicals, four U.D.S.R. deputies (including M. Mitterrand), three Independents, two *Convention Africaine* deputies, two *non-inscrits*, and one M.R.P. Those abstaining, in addition to 31 Poujadists, included M. Edgar Faure (R.G.R.), M. Robert Schuman (M.R.P.), M. Paul Reynaud (Independent), and M. Arrighi (*Gauche Démocratique*).

The Foreign Minister, M. Pineau, told the Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly on Feb. 14 that although the forces in Algeria had been authorized to retaliate in self-defence, the Government's permission was required for large-scale operations. The decision to bomb Sakhiet had been taken locally, without consulting M. Gaillard, M. Chaban-Delmas, or M. Lacoste (the Resident Minister in Algeria), but the Government considered itself morally obliged to accept responsibility.

M. Pineau added that there were two aspects of the Sakhiet bombing. One was the death of women and children, for which France had expressed her regret and offered compensation. The other was the continued armed conflict along the Algerian-Tunisian frontier. Although this was a matter in which France was accusing Tunisia of repeated violations of the Algerian frontier and

interference in French affairs, France was prepared to accept a Franco-Tunisian frontier commission under neutral chairmanship, which, among other matters, might delimit a no-man's land along the frontier. France, however, could not begin conversations with Tunisia while her own troops in that country were being "threatened with suffocation." M. Pineau stated that the number of Algerian rebels operating on Tunisian territory was estimated at between 6,000 and 7,000 (a larger force than the Tunisian Army itself).

M. Pineau's statement on the background of the Sakhiet bombing was severely criticized by **M. Robert Schuman**, who asked how a local commander could launch a fleet of 25 aircraft, and, who said that this looked more like a reprisal than like the right to hit back. **M. Jules Moch** (Socialist) and **M. Pleven** (U.D.S.R.) also strongly criticized the action taken by the local commander.

Grave disquiet was aroused by the Sakhiet raid both in Britain and in the United States.

In Washington, Mr. Dulles (the Secretary of State) informed the French Ambassador, M. Alphand, on Feb. 9 of the Government's concern at the incident, and on the following day had talks with M. Mongi Slim. The State Department issued a statement on Feb. 10 saying that the U.S. Government was "profoundly disturbed" by the raid in view of its possible effects on relations between two countries that were both friends of the U.S.A., and expressing the hope that France and Tunisia would find a means of reconciling their differences.

In London, Mr. Noble (Minister of State for Foreign Affairs) told the House of Commons on Feb. 12 that the British Government was actively discussing the situation with the French and Tunisian Governments, on whom it had urged the need for moderation and restraint. It was subsequently revealed on Feb. 17 that the British Government had offered shortly after the raid to use its good offices to bring about a renewal of conversations between France and Tunisia and that similar offers had been made by Italy, the Lebanon, and the United States.

On Feb. 18 M. Mongi Slim formally requested the president of the Security Council (M. Sobolev, U.S.S.R.) to convene a meeting of the Council in order to condemn the "deliberate act of aggression" at Sakhiet and to take measures "to end a situation which threatens Tunisia's security and endangers international peace."

M. Slim said in an accompanying memorandum that the Tunisian Government had imposed restrictions on the French forces in the country "in exercise of its right of self-defence," and that it would decline to take responsibility for the consequences if the "occupation forces" attempted to violate these arrangements. In a second letter, submitted on Feb. 17, M. Slim explained that the "situation threatening Tunisia's security" was the presence of French troops in Tunisia, whilst the "situation endangering international peace" was the Algerian war and its repercussions on Tunisia's security, particularly the French encroachments on Tunisia territory.

A memorandum handed to M. Sobolev by M. Georges-Picot, the French permanent representative at the U.N. alleged that the F.L.N. general staff had been installed in Tunis since July 1957, with the Tunisian Government's permission; that the F.L.N. had bases and training camps Tunisia; that the Tunisian authorities permitted and sometimes facilitated the movements

of F.L.N. forces, and took an active part in supplying them with arms; and that the Tunisian radio gave "moral assistance" to the rebellion. "The counter-action of the French Air Force on the occasion of the event leading to the Tunisian complaint," the memorandum stated, "originated in the numerous provocations suffered by our troops. Whilst the French Government deplores the casualties suffered by the civil population, it finds it impossible to isolate this event from those which caused it."

In a Note delivered to the Tunisian Government on Feb. 13 by M. Bénard, the French *chargé d'affaires*, the French Government referred to the gravity of the situation caused by the blockade of the French forces in Tunisia, who in some places were suffering from a shortage of supplies; gave warning that it would hold the Tunisian Government responsible for any incident arising from the supply problem; and protested against the expulsion of French citizens from the frontier areas. The Note also referred to the possibility of the resumption of direct negotiations on the whole problem of Franco-Tunisian relations.

Although the Tunisian Government's reply (Feb. 14) rejected this suggestion, a number of developments during the next few days led to a certain relaxation of tension. In a broadcast on Feb. 13 President Bourguiba had already offered to withdraw the Tunisian complaint to the Security Council if France accepted U.S. mediation, and had stated that, in view of Bizerta's importance to Western defence, he would be prepared to discuss with all the NATO Powers except France the possibility of putting the base under NATO control. On Feb. 15 the French Government announced that, while refusing to accept arbitration, it would accept the good offices of a third Power, and that the French Red Cross would be asked to co-operate with the Tunisian Red Crescent in evaluating the damage caused to civilians at Sakhiet, with a view to compensation. On Feb. 16 President Bourguiba accepted a proposal by Dr. Hammarskjöld to allow the French troops to receive supplies, on the understanding that transport facilities would be used solely for this purpose, [Some of the outlying French garrisons had already received supplies by helicopter, with the tacit consent of the Tunisian authorities.] Finally, on Feb. 17 the French and Tunisian Governments formally announced their acceptance of the British and U.S. Governments' offer of their good offices.

In an interview with *Le Monde's* correspondent on Feb. 17, President Bourguiba said that to reach a settlement it would be necessary to deal with the Algerian problem; he commented that "a semi-internationalization between members of the Atlantic family is preferable to total internationalization before the Security Council." Emphasizing that it was impossible for French troops to remain in Tunisia, he continued: "We are convinced that among the French leaders are some who have not accepted the independence of Tunisia and Morocco... That is the difference between France and Britain. The British imprisoned Nehru... but after the proclamation of independence that was all over. With France, the difficulties begin with independence..." The French Army, he added, must leave Tunisia as quickly as possible; the smaller posts must be evacuated on the basis of "a reasonable timetable," whilst the evacuation of Bizerta might take until the end of the year.

When the Security Council met on Feb. 18, it was agreed to adjourn consideration of the French and Tunisian complaints *sine die*, pending the outcome of the Anglo-American offer of good offices.

At the beginning of the meeting, **M. Georges-Picot** said that in agreeing to put the Tunisian complaint on the agenda France did not endorse its wording, as what was involved was not an "act of aggression" but an isolated act for which France had already expressed regret and offered compensation. Confirming the offer of good offices, **Mr. Wadsworth** (U.S.A.) stated that the U.S. and British Governments might have "affirmative suggestions" to make, **Sir Pierson Dixon** (United Kingdom) said that whilst Britain's essential object was to bring the two parties together, she might also "wish to offer some positive suggestions to them." **M. Sobolev** agreed that the offer of good offices was in accordance with the U.N. Charter, and said that the Soviet Union proceeded from the assumption that good offices, whoever tendered them, should not be "utilized to exert pressure on any country for the purpose of imposing conditions running counter to its sovereignty or extracting benefits for the State playing the role of mediator." A proposal by **Mr. Matsudaira** (Japan) that consideration of the Tunisian and French complaints should be adjourned *sine die* was adopted unanimously; **M. Slim**, however, stated that his Government reserved the right to request an emergency meeting if the good offices did not appear to be yielding useful results.

The agreement to accept Anglo-American mediation was, however, followed by a number of incidents which gave rise to a renewal of tension between France and Tunisia.

As the French Embassy refused to comply with the Tunisian demand for the closing of five French Consulates, the Tunisian Government on Feb. 17 withdrew the consular rights of the Consulates at Gabès, Gafsa, and Medjez-el-Bab, and declared their staffs and those of the Consulates at Le Kef and Souk-el Arba *persona non gratae*. When the Consulates still remained open on orders from Paris, they were closed by the Tunisian authorities on Feb. 20, the Consuls being conducted to Tunis under police escort. A strong French protest against this measure was made to the Tunisian Government on Feb. 21, and a complaint lodged with the Security Council on the following day.

On Feb. 19 a French army lorry was blown up by a land mine which had been planted on the military airstrip at Remada (in Southern Tunisia), a French officer and soldier being wounded. The French troops stationed at Remada thereupon arrested the local representative of the Tunisian Government, as well as 11 other Tunisians whom they regarded as suspect, and released them only after several hours on orders from General Gamblez, the French C.-in-C. The situation nevertheless remained tense at Remada, where the French forces were reported to have sealed off the village, and calm was only restored after General Gambiez had personally flown to Remada in order to normalize the situation.

In various parts of Tunisia seven French residents were arrested on Feb. 19, and another nine on Feb. 27, on charges of illegal possession of arms, whilst 12 Frenchmen living in the Bizerta area were arrested and immediately expelled from the country on Feb. 28, no reason being given.