

Title: Exchange of notes between Great Britain and Italy
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Italy - United Kingdom

20. EXCHANGE OF NOTES BETWEEN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ITALY RESPECTING CONCESSIONS FOR A BARRAGE AT LAKE TSANA AND A RAILWAY ACROSS ABYSSINIA FROM ERITREA TO ITALIAN SOMALILAND. ROMEO, 14 AND 20 DECEMBER 1925 69/

(No. 1) The British Ambassador at Rome to the Italian Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs

Rome, December 14, 1925

Monsieur le President du Conseil,

Your Excellency is well aware of the vital importance to Egypt and the Sudan of maintaining and, if possible, increasing the volume of water for irrigation purposes available in those countries from the Blue and White Niles and their tributary streams. Various schemes for the purpose have been carried out or are projected and you are informed of the negotiations undertaken at Addis Ababa by His Majesty's Government, acting in a fiduciary capacity for the Sudan Government and mindful of Egyptian interests in the matter, in order to obtain a concession from the Government of Abyssinia for the construction of a barrage at Lake Tsana with a view to storing its waters for use in the Blue Nile. So far these negotiations have led to no practical result.

In November 1919 the delegates of the Italian Government then in London were good enough to offer Italian co-operation in this question in the following terms:

"In view of the predominating interests of Great Britain in respect of the control of the waters of Lake Tsana, Italy offers Great Britain her supports, in order that she may obtain from Ethiopia the concession to carry out works of barrage in the lake itself, within the Italian sphere of influence, pending the delimitation of the extent of the territorial zone to be recognised as pertaining to Great Britain in respect of the latter's predominant hydraulic interests, and pending a just consideration of the reservation on behalf of Italy by the Tripartite Agreement likewise in respect of her hydraulic interests. Italy further offers her support to Great Britain in order that the latter may obtain from Ethiopia the right to construct and maintain a motor road between lake Tsana and the Sudan.

"Italy requests the support of Great Britain in order that she may obtain from the Ethiopian Government the concession to construct and to run a railway from the frontier of Eritrea to the frontier of Italian Somaliland, which railway, according to the Tripartite Agreement, must pass to the West of Addis Ababa. It is understood that this railways, together with all the necessary works for its construction and for its running, must have an entirely free passage across the above-mentioned motor road.

"Italy requests from Great Britain, as she also reserves to herself the right to request from France, an exclusive economic influence in the West of Ethiopia and in the whole of the territory to be crossed by the above-mentioned railway, and the promise to support with the Ethiopian Government all requests for economic concessions regarding the Italian zone."

The above offer was not entertained at the time chiefly owing to the strong objection felt to the idea of allowing a foreign power to establish any sort of control over the head waters of rivers so vital to the prosperity and even the existence of Egypt and the Sudan. But in view of the relations of mutual confidence so happily existing between our two Governments, His Majesty's Government desire to extend to this question the principle of friendly co-operation which has proved so valuable in other fields. His Britannic Majesty's Government have accordingly further examined the question and recognise that the Italian proposal is not in contradiction with the stipulations of the London Agreement of the 13th December, 1906, since the object of that agreement is to maintain the status quo in Ethiopia on the basis of the international instruments indicated in article 1 thereof and the co-ordination of the action of the signatory States to protect their respective interests so that they should not suffer prejudice.

They would therefore welcome the Italian support offered provided that it can be accepted without prejudice to those paramount hydraulic interests of Egypt and the Sudan which the Italian Government have not failed to recognise.

I have therefore the honour, under instructions from His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to request Your Excellency's support and assistance at Addis Ababa with the Abyssinian Government in order to obtain from them a concession for His Majesty's Government to construct a barrage at Lake Tsana, together with the right to construct and maintain a motor road for the passage of stores, personnel etc., from the frontier of the Sudan to the barrage.

His Majesty's Government in return are prepared to support the Italian Government in obtaining from the Abyssinian Government a concession to construct and run a railway from the frontier of Eritrea to the frontier of Italian Somaliland, It would be understood that this railway, together with all the necessary works for its construction and for its running, would have entirely free passage across the motor road mentioned above.

With this object in view the necessary identic instructions should be sent to the British and Italian representatives in Ethiopia to concert for common action with the Abyssinian Government in order to obtain that the concessions desired by the Governments of Great Britain and Italy regarding Lake Tsana and the construction of a railway to join up Eritrea with Italian Somaliland should be granted contemporaneously. It remains understood that, in the event of one of the two Governments securing the concession sought for while the other Government failed to do so, the Government which had obtained satisfaction would not relax their whole-hearted efforts to secure a corresponding satisfaction for the other Government concerned.

In the event of His Majesty's Government, with the valued assistance of the Italian Government, obtaining from the Abyssinian Government the desired concession on Lake Tsana, they are also prepared to recognise an exclusive Italian economic influence in the west of Abyssinia and in the whole of the territory to be crossed by the above-mentioned railway. They would further promise to support with the Abyssinian Government all Italian requests for economic concessions in the above zone. But such recognition and undertaking are subject to the proviso that the Italian Government on their sides recognising the prior hydraulic rights of Egypt and the Sudan, will engage not to construct on the head waters of the Blue or White Niles or their tributaries or effluents any work which might sensibly modify their flow into the main river. It is understood that the above proviso would not preclude a reasonable use of the waters in question by the inhabitants of the even to the extent of constructing dams for hydro-electric power or small reservoirs in minor effluents to store water for domestic purposes, as well as for the cultivation of the food crops necessary to their own subsistence.

His Majesty's Government avail themselves of this opportunity to assure the Italian Government that the construction and operation of the dam will be effected so far as possible with locally recruited labour and will not raise the level of the waters in the lake beyond the maximum hitherto attained during the rainy season. They are therefore confident that the existence of the dam will not only be of value to Egypt and the Sudan, but will increase the prosperity and promote the economic progress of the local inhabitants

I take this opportunity, etc.

(No. 2) The Italian Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the British Ambassador at Rome

(Translation)

Rome, December 20, 1925

M. l'Ambassadeur

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of the note of the 14th December, in which Your Excellency, on instructions from your Government, drew my attention to the problem of the irrigation of Egypt and the Sudan and to the negotiations hitherto conducted without result by the British Government to obtain from the Abyssinian Government the concession for the construction of a barrage at Lake Tsana, with the object of storing the waters of the lake to feed the Blue Nile.

I have, therefore, the honour to state to Your Excellency that the Royal Government will support the British Government with the Ethiopian Government, in order to obtain from the latter the concession to construct a barrage at Lake Tsana, together with the right to construct and maintain a motor road for the passage of stores, personnel etc., from the frontier of the Sudan to the barrage.

The Royal Government take note, on the other hand, that the British Government will, in return, support the Italian Government in obtaining from the Abyssinian Government the concession to construct and operate a railway from the frontier of Eritrea to the frontier of Italian Somaliland, it remaining understood that this railway, together with all the necessary works for its construction and operation, shall have free transit across the motor road mentioned above.

On their side the Italian Government, recognising the prior hydraulic rights of Egypt and the Sudan, engage not to construct on the head waters of the Blue Nile and the White Nile and their tributaries and effluents any work which might sensibly modify their flow into the main river.

I note that His Britannic Majesty's Government have every intention of respecting the existing water rights of the populations of the neighbouring territories which enter into the sphere of exclusive Italian economic influence. It is understood that, in so far as is possible and is compatible with the paramount interests of Egypt and the Sudan, the scheme in contemplation should be so framed and executed as to afford appropriate satisfaction to the economic need of these populations

69/ British and Foreign State Papers, vol. 121, p. 805.