

Fighting the Federation

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Dec. 21, 1962

For months the bush telegraph of Brunei had flashed the warning that deep inside the Delaware-size oil-rich British protectorate on the north coast of Borneo, a secret rebel army was rehearsing a revolt against the Sultan. Repeatedly, government officials dismissed the story as "another jungle rumor." But last week, in a brief, bloody rebellion, rumor materialized into fact, bringing the threat of a long, nasty guerrilla war in the steaming swamps and forests of the protectorate, and imperiling the prospects of the Malaysian Federation.

Major cause of the revolt, it seemed, was the federation plan itself. Brunei's dominant, fiercely independent People's Party was dead against the alignment of the state with Malaya, Singapore, and the neighboring British possessions of Sarawak and North Borneo. Instead, People's Party Leader A. M. Azahari, 34, a goateed veterinarian, was determined to weld Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo into a single independent nation. But the British-backed Sultan of Brunei, Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin, wanted to join Malaysia, for Brunei's oil resources, which yield him \$40 million annually, promised him influence in the federation disproportionate to his country's size and minuscule population (85,000). Stymied by the Sultan, Azahari's rebels finally attacked.

In the predawn darkness, the ragtag irregulars set up roadblocks, sabotaged communications lines, and overran police stations all over the country. In the town of Seria, Shell Oil's Brunei headquarters, the rebels rounded up 55 hostages, formed them into a human shield, and marched them to a nearby police barracks. But when the police fired on the shield, both prisoners and rebels broke and ran.

Message from Manila. Caught by surprise, colonial authorities flashed word of the emergency to British headquarters in Singapore, sent messengers canoeing up jungle streams with sticks bearing red feathers—a traditional appeal for armed assistance from loyal warriors of the interior. Eluding rebel kidnapers, and nervously fingering a Sterling submachine gun, the Sultan escaped to a police station.

The shooting had hardly begun when Rebel Chieftain Azahari turned up in Manila, of all places, to make sure the world press got the full story. Amid a blizzard of statements, he proclaimed himself Prime Minister of the "unitary state of North Borneo," and demanded support for his rebellion from world leaders. The only encouragement came from Indonesia's Sukarno, who has long coveted Brunei's oilfields and would like nothing more than to absorb the protectorate into Indonesian Borneo.

But the end was near for the rebels, for British troops began pouring into Brunei by air. Hawker Hunter jets of the R.A.F. buzzed low over rebel emplacements firing blank 20-mm. cannon shells; many rebel troops fled in terror because they had never before heard the shriek of a jet engine. Other rebels fought on, inflicted substantial casualties on Britain's tough little Gurkha troops. The Gurkhas retaliated by lopping off a few rebel heads. Finally British numbers began to tell and the rebels faded away into the jungle.

Trouble Ahead. Britain's fear is that they will fight on in the thickets. Worse, the rebels' action has encouraged the scattered anti-federation forces in many parts of the area that is to be Malaysia. In Singapore, trouble is expected from pro-Communist Chinese elements who are opposed to alignment with Malaya, Southeast Asia's sturdiest anti-Communist

state, and keystone of the Malaysia scheme. In any case, the fighting could break out again at any time. As one rebel ominously put it: "We were beaten this time. Next time we will get more arms and maybe we won't be beaten."

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