**Casement to Sir Edward Grey**

**TNA FO 371/1201/47209**

Right Honourable Sir Edward Grey Bart, M.P. etc etc etc

Foreign Office

The Savoy,

Denham,

Bucks,

20 June 1911.

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of Mr. Mallet's letter No. 21192/11 of 16th instant transmitting copy of a letter of the Peruvian Amazon Company of 31 May last, covering an extract of the report to them of their Commission to the Putumayo which has been sent to me, by your direction, for my observations.

I beg to transmit herewith a note of such observations as have occurred to me on reading over the Commissioners remarks.

It would be no service to emphasize wherein I think their treatment of the subject falls short of the necessities of the situation, and I have confined my observations to pointing out that in my opinion the root of the evil state of things touched on in the report lies in the fact that instead of the enterprise having been a commercial one, based on a scheme dealing in the natural products of the country with the native inhabitants or relying for results on any process that could be called one of commercial development it has rested solely on the enslavement and forced labour of these people.

This system of forced labour is one of the most dangerous that even a powerful and ably controlled executive can embark on for public purposes. In the hands of a company existing for private gain and uncontrolled by law, with neither police, magistrates nor any effective administration nearer than 1000 miles away, and with the “labourers” on whom the pressure is to be exercised primitive tribes of savages, practically without means of defence, such a system cannot possibly be maintained without a pressure that is bound to degenerate into serious outrage and maltreatment.

The Peruvian Amazon Company has absolutely no right to the labour of the Indians. It has no legal right, as a matter of fact, to the land on which its establishments are erected much less to thousands of square miles of the surrounding forests and the rubber trees in them. Assuming that its “squatters claims” (the sole existing claim it possesses on the Putumayo) are recognised by Peruvian or Columbian law any such ultimate recognition could confer no title deeds to the persons and labour of the Indian dwellers in those same regions.

The assumption, everywhere proceeded on along the Amazon waterways, that the native Indian has no rights is at the bottom of the whole of the miserable series of crimes and tragedies which everywhere dog the path of the so called civilized white man in his invasion of these primitive regions.

A British controlled enterprise has no right to base its proceedings on a lawless formula which successfully disputes the field with the statute law of the land. It must see that its dealings with the native inhabitants rest upon a wholly different understanding, and while I am quite aware that a change of this sweeping character cannot be quickly or easily effected, I have no doubt it is in this direction the Company must aim if it would escape the very severe criticism its past neglect of duty calls for.

I understand that another meeting of the Board of Directors will be held at the end of this month, at which I propose being present and a report upon which will be submitted in due course.

The copy of the letter of the Peruvian Amazon Company of 31st May and the extract from the Commissioners report are returned herewith.

I see no reason why the Company should not be asked to furnish His Majesty's Government with a complete copy of the report.

It will doubtless become necessary, at a later date, to draw the attention of the Peruvian Government to the need for the creation of an independent magistracy upon the Putumayo.

The existing representatives of that government are both of them in the pay of the Company and are stated by the Commissioners to have not at any time exercised their public functions.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient,

humble servant,

Roger Casement.

**Note on the Extract from the Report of the Commission of the Peruvian Amazon Company Ltd. of 16 May 1911, transmitted by the Company to the Foreign Office in their letter of 31 May 1911.**

The Extract is not a very complete document, and as it stands, furnishes only an outline of what the Commissioners found themselves in contact with.

It might be subjected to criticism on the score of its omissions, but since there is no disagreement, so far as I am aware, between the Commissioners and myself upon the facts laid bare in my reports, which they admit are a faithful rendering of what they have themselves have omitted to state to the Company, I am not called upon to do more than draw attention to the fact that as an exposure of the method of dealing employed by the Company's agents with the native Indians of the Putumayo the report is inadequate.

I do not propose, however, to criticize in detail the Commissioners statements but will merely point out where in some instances, I may differ from their conclusions or where I think His Majesty's Government are entitled to ask for more precise information than the present extract furnishes. I will begin with the latter.

Paragraph x. Method of Investigation.

It is stated that “a note of the regular questions put to the Chiefs of Sections is appended, also a comparative table showing numbers of Indians, etc., schedules 2 and 3”

These schedules and this information should be asked for.

XII. (Paragraph.)

The sketch map referred to might also be submitted to the Foreign Office for inspection and comparison with the maps already in our possession.

I will limit my observations on the report to what I deem to be matters of material importance to the future of the native Indians which the Peruvian Amazon Company, as long as it may be responsible for the conduct of affairs in that region, should take into earnest consideration.

In paragraphs XXXIV and XXXV, under the head of “Organisation” the report touches upon the relations of the Company's agents with the Indians in what are, to my mind, too vague terms. From these paragraphs it would be assumed that the Indians were employees of labourers of the Company, that the latter had a right to their labour and that in fact they were legitimately acquired assets of an enterprise whose methods were commercial.

A misconception, which is a very grave one, capable of the most vicious expansion underlies this view of the relations of the Indians to the commercial associations which may establish themselves in their neighbourhood.

Instead of the “scheme of administration outlined above” (paragraph 35) being “excellent in theory”, as the report states, it is this very scheme which is at the bottom of the disgraceful conditions prevailing throughout so wide a region of the Upper Amazon.

This scheme of things takes no account whatsoever of the Indian as a native or inhabitant of the territory the white or civilized man enters, with pre-existent native rights and long established methods of existence that are to him of vital importance.

If these be not considered, and the relations between the Indians and the trader are, at the outset, to be established on the assumption that the former belong to the latter it is impossible to prevent these relations degenerating into slavery. It is because Peruvians, Colombians, Brazilians and all the rest of the mainly half breed population that constitutes the trading element of that part of the world have proceeded on this presumption and have regarded the wild Indians as beings to be captured and “assigned” to one or other of themselves that we find the Commissioners in their summary (paragraph XLIII) confessing that “The Indians were considered as possessing none of the rights of humanity etc.”

It is the duty of a British Trading Company to organise its dealings with the primitive humans beings on other lines and so far as it can prevail over the evil circumstances of the vicious surroundings, for whose growth it is not responsible, to treat these people as its clients or customers, not as servile dependents. Its object should be to beget independence to recognise that the Indian has rights over which it can exercise no jurisdiction, and in the absence of any effective administration by an impartial governing authority to see that its dealings with the native population shall be more and more founded on freedom of intercourse, mutually profitable, rather than on compulsion and supervision, and allotted tasks which, however controlled, in such surroundings must degenerate into slavery. The Company should reorganise its method of deal upon a purely commercial basis and substitute a free barter trade for the existing scheme of spoliation and exploitation which, whatever reforms may be instituted, is a wholly improper one for civilized men to take part in.

I am aware that this cannot be expected in a day and that after the long period of oppression and outrage to which the Indians have been subjected the substitution of a business understanding between Indians and whitemen for that of slave and master which has hitherto prevailed must take time but I am quite clear that it should be the end in view of any board of respectable directors responsible to a healthy public opinion and who are determined that their connection with a primitive people, the sources of their revenue, shall rest on decent and mutually profitable grounds.

The Indian can be and should be encouraged in many ways to improve his surroundings by those who have an interest in his welfare and the ability to assist him, but the responsibility for his ordinary food supplies (his plantations etc) is not one the company is called upon to assume. If they see that their dealings with him are clean handed and honest and are based on recognition of his inherent rights there is no fear of the Indian not feeding himself sufficiently and well. Before the white pirates came among them the wild Amazon Indians never lacked for food. The Indians furthest removed from the Company's “sections” were the best fed of those I came in contact with.

The starved wretches again and again encountered were in a state of semi-starvation because their native life had been shamelessly invaded - their rights over land, their right to rest, to cultivate their own soil, to be at peace with their wives and children, in a word their entire personal and family freedom had been confiscated by force and in entire defiance of all law and the set terms of the Constitutions of those republics which claim the territory.

The British Company are not responsible for the conditions of neglect of duty and perverse ill dealing that have ruled in these vast territories and still control the relations of so called whitemen with the native dwellers of the forest. but they are responsible for their own handling of this problem. Having gone into this Peruvian enterprise with their eyes shut they must, now that their eyes are opened, seek to establish within the region they control a wholly different state of things.

I am not very sanguine of their ability to do so. The difficulties are great, but I feel convinced that the Company, without grave danger to its reputation, cannot remain a British controlled enterprise on other lines - and the attempt is one well worth making.

If they can be assured a sufficient time without interference from the surrounding criminal elements to carry out this change of system there is no reason why, in the end, it should not prove more profitable to themselves than the merciless and extravagant waste of human life and natural resources which have hitherto taken the place of commerce.

At any rate it is the only excuse for their continued existence as a British Company and if they are not prepared to make the attempt they have no right to maintain the claim that their intentions are those of legitimate commerce.

This criticism implies sweeping changes which must entail a complete reorganization, from top to bottom, of the Company's affairs. It can only be gradually effected, step by step; and can only be effected at all if the Directors realise to the full their grave responsibility and they are assured of support and protection against the lawless squatting elements which constitute the advance guard (and it might be said the vanguard) of Peruvian and Upper amazonian civilization in its contact with the natives and natural resources of that region.

In other words, the Company has got to do away with exploitation and substitute, as effectively as it can, legitimate trade dealings.

This must be the basis of its intercourse with the Indians, and if, in addition to this it can secure numbers of Indians willing to engage as labourers, on definite terms, and to plant rubber trees under competent supervision, so much the better; but there must be a clear and guiding perception of the innate and individual rights of the Indians.

RC

20 June 1911