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### 'The Debai incident'

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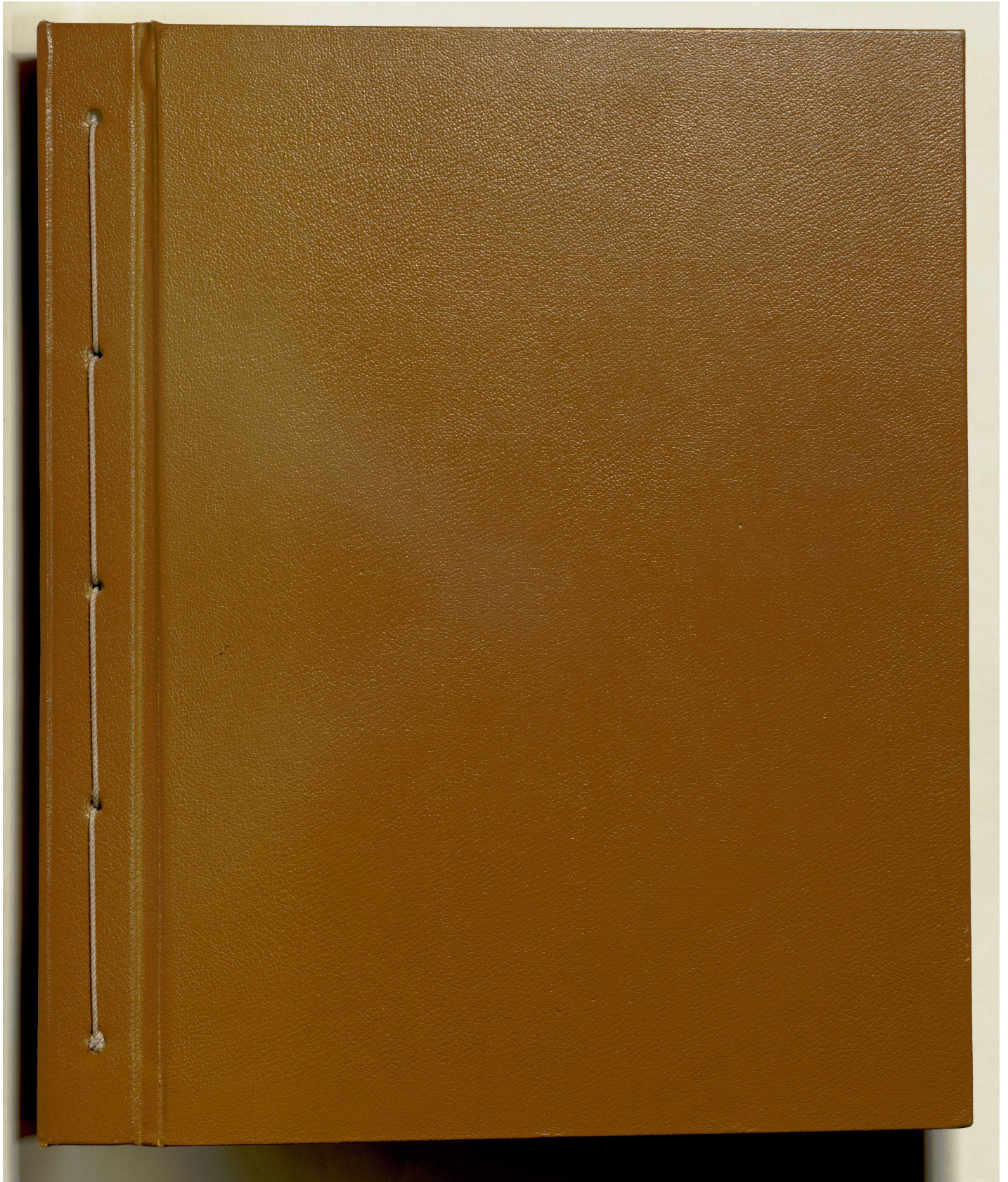


#### About this record

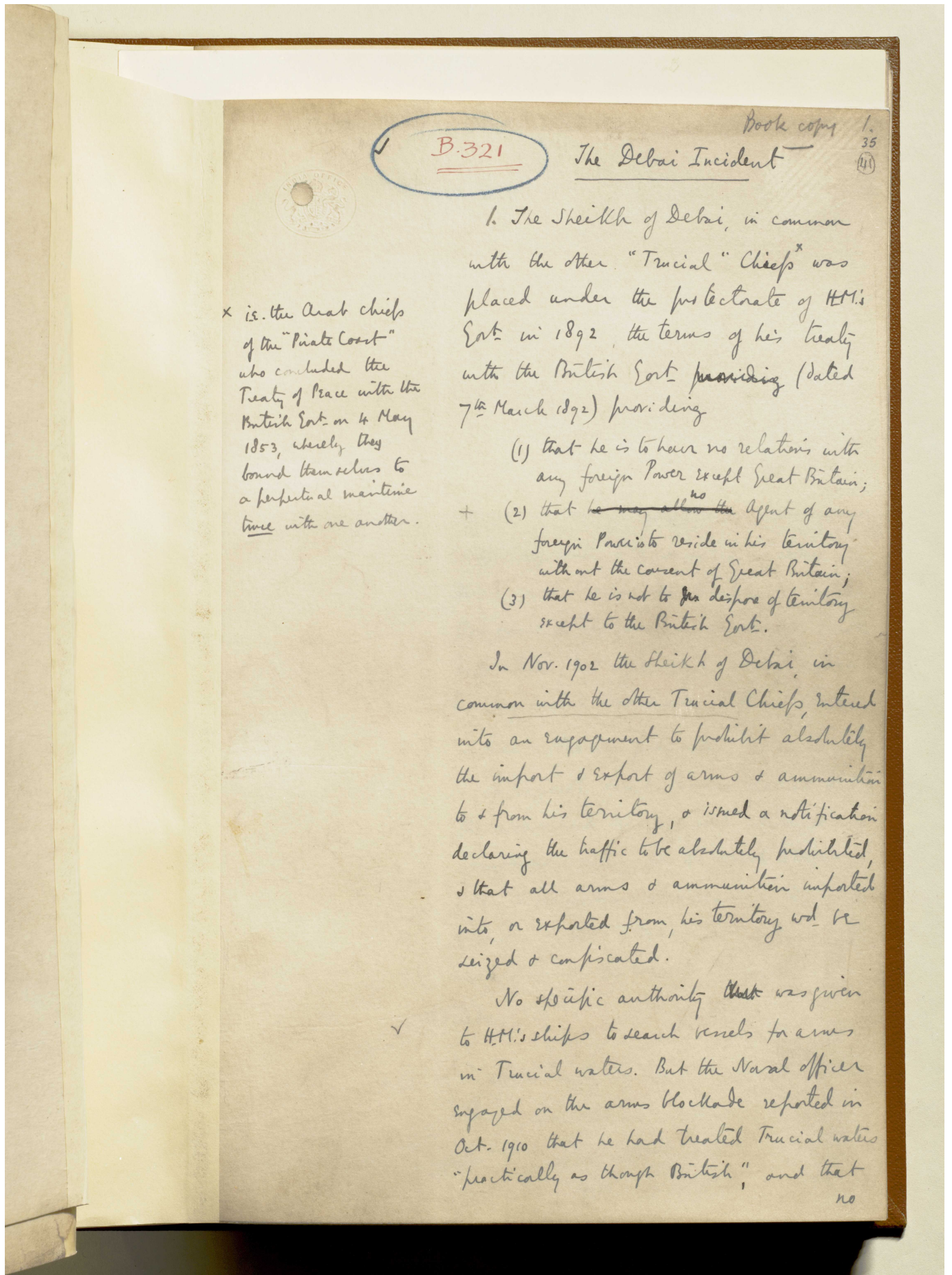
This handwritten memorandum concerns the Debai [Dubai] Incident of 1910-1911. The memorandum gives a background on British treaty relations with the Sheikh Buṭṭī bin Suhayl Āl Maktum of Dubai, the arms blockade on the Trucial coast, and a narrative of the incident that occurred on 24 December 1910 and subsequent events. Printed copies of the principal telegrams relating to the Dubai Incident appear between folios 49-51.



'The Debai incident' [front] (1/24)







✓ B.321

Book copy 1. 35 (41)

The Debai Incident

x is. the Arab chiefs of the "Pirate Coast" who concluded the Treaty of Peace with the British Govt. on 4 May 1853, whereby they bound themselves to a perpetual maritime truce with one another.



1. The Sheikh of Debai, in common with the other "Trucial" Chiefs<sup>x</sup> was placed under the protection of H.M.'s Govt. in 1892, the terms of his treaty with the British Govt. providing (dated 7<sup>th</sup> March 1892) providing

- (1) that he is to have no relations with any foreign Power except Great Britain;
- + (2) that he ~~may allow~~<sup>no</sup> the Agent of any foreign Power to reside in his territory without the consent of Great Britain;
- (3) that he is not to ~~lose~~ dispose of territory except to the British Govt.

In Nov. 1902 the Sheikh of Debai, in common with the other Trucial Chiefs, entered into an engagement to prohibit absolutely the import & export of arms & ammunition to & from his territory, & issued a notification declaring the traffic to be absolutely prohibited, & that all arms & ammunition imported into, or exported from, his territory wd. be seized & confiscated.

✓ No specific authority ~~that~~ was given to H.M.'s ships to search vessels for arms in Trucial waters. But the Naval Officer engaged on the arms blockade reported in Oct. 1910 that he had treated Trucial waters "practically as though British," and that no



'The Debai incident' [41v] (3/24)





(236  
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no complaints had been made. The F.O. ruled in Dec. 1910 that the Tuncial Chiefs might "be held to have acquiesced in the assumption by H.M.'s boats of powers of policing "their territorial waters", & saw no objection to H.M.'s ships continuing to search vessels for arms in tuncial waters as they had hitherto done.

2. On the 20<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1910 Lieut. Noakes R.N. (of the "Hyacinth", engaged in the arms blockade), suspecting arms to be concealed in a house in Debai, called upon the Sheikh to search this house in his presence. The Sheikh made difficulties, but after much delay a perfunctory search was made, with out result, in Lieut. Noakes' presence.

Subsequently Lieut. Noakes learned that the arms had been removed while he was ~~being kept~~ waiting for the search to begin. Other information also reached the Commander of the "Hyacinth" of the concealment of arms, for export purposes, in Debai.

3. Accordingly on the 24<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1910 Capt. Dick landed at Debai with a party of about 100 men, and proceeded to







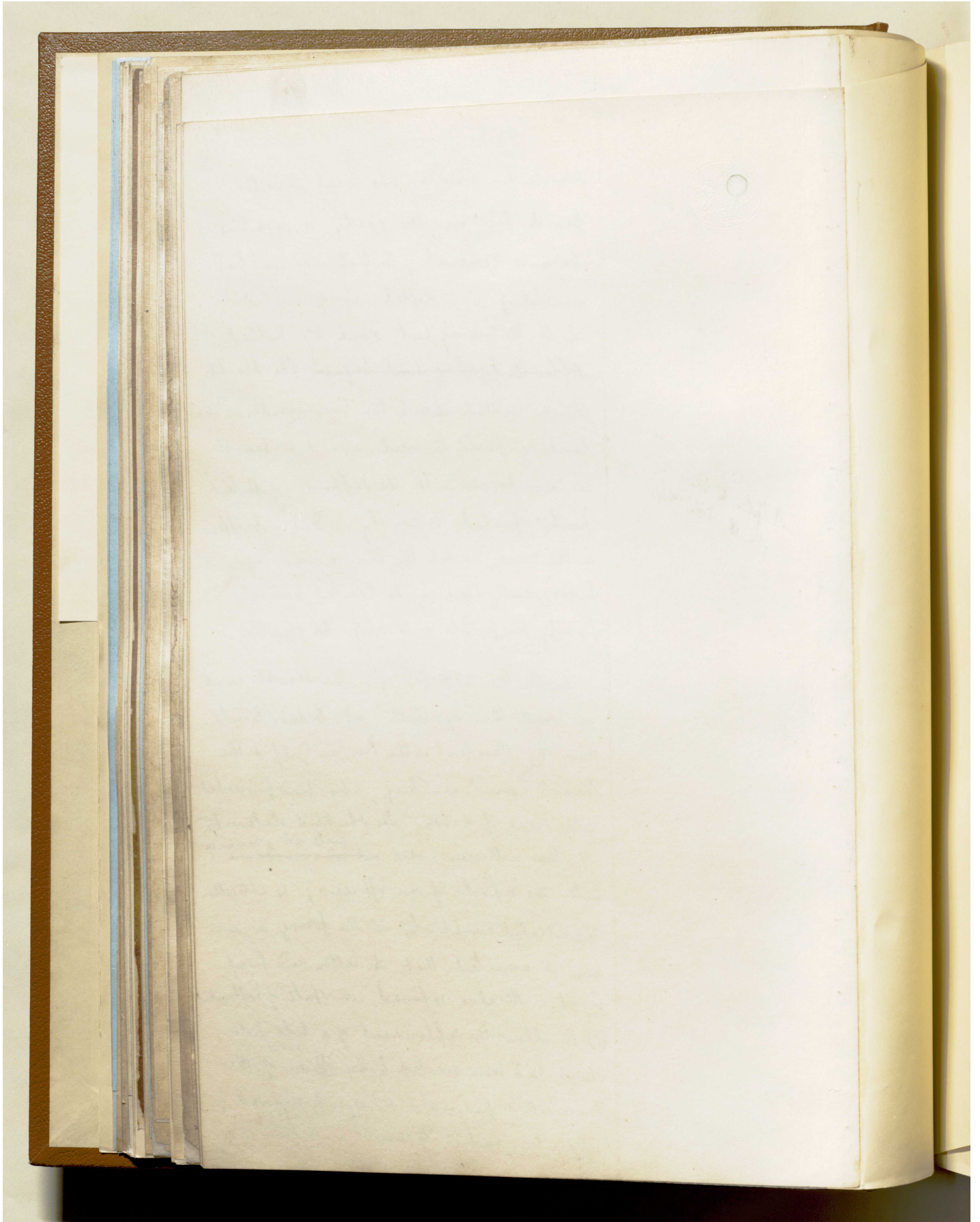
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(43)

search for arms. The local Arabo  
opened fire on the party, & fighting  
became general, British casualties  
amounting to 5 killed and 9 wounded,  
while the enemy lost some 37 killed.  
After the fighting had begun The Sheikh,  
though called upon by the Commander of the  
landing party to meet him & to search  
certain houses with the support of British  
party, failed to comply & did not appear  
on the scene until the trouble had begun.  
Subsequently, however, he exerted himself to  
pacify his people & to stop the fighting.

4. On the 28<sup>th</sup> Dec 1900 the Sheikh came  
on board the "Hyacinth" at Debai to inter-  
view the Resident in the Persian Gulf & the  
Naval Comm<sup>o</sup>-in-Chief, who had proceeded  
to the scene of action. The Sheikh's statements  
at this interview were <sup>quite at</sup> ~~not in accordance~~ <sup>variance</sup>  
with the reports of our officers; he altogether  
repudiated complicity in the firing on our  
men & asserted that the latter had fired  
first. He also refused, in spite of explanation  
(1) to allow the replacement of a tide-pole  
which had been erected by the officer of the  
"Hyacinth's" pinnace, & subsequently removed by  
the Sheikh; and (2) to receive a British officer



'The Debai incident' [43v] (7/24)





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(44)

as Resident's Agent at Debai

5. An ultimatum was therefore presented to the Sheikh in writing, the following terms being demanded, & 48 hours given for compliance :-

What is a tide-gate  
A pole to show depth of water  
on the tide ebb & flow.

\* Under the "Additional Article" (concluded in 1864) of the Treaty of Peace of 4th May 1853, all the Trucial Chiefs (including the Sheikh of Debai) undertook "to respect and abstain from all & every interference with such telegraphic operations" as might be carried on by the British Govt in ~~any~~ or near their territory.

- (1) Immediate replacement of tide-hole & its retention as long as required by the Officer commanding H.M.'s ship stationed <sup>at Debai</sup> there;
- (2) acceptance of telegraph installation whenever considered necessary by H.M.'s Govt\*;
- (3) delivery of 400 serviceable rifles;
- (4) payment of Rs. 50,000 as a fine.

This fine was to be considered as at the disposal of the British Govt; its retention or restoration being conditional on the Sheikh's acceptance of the 2. following conditions, which did not form part of the present ultimatum :-

- (5) acceptance of British Officer as agent, with small personal guard;
- (6) establishment of a sub Post-Office of the Indian Postal Dept. at Debai.

6. The Sheikh (influenced, ~~it is taken there~~ ~~in error~~ to believe, by two other Trucial



'The Debai incident' [44v] (9/24)





S 39  
45

Chiefs, the Sheikhs of Sharjah & Um-el-Kawain, who had come to Debai) signified his acceptance of the British terms on the 30<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1910.

This was reported by the Naval Command-in-Chief on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1911. Admiral Slade added that, in his opinion (in that of Col. Cox, the recent incident afforded a further illustration of the necessity of placing a British Agent at Debai "in order to strengthen our hold not only upon Debai but upon the coast generally"; but he recognized that it might be difficult to install the Agent without resorting to force. He therefore (with Col. Cox's concurrence) urged that a force of 1000 men, and including artillery & sappers, should be held in readiness to be sent up in the event of the Sheikh refusing to comply with the demand, when made, ~~that~~ <sup>for</sup> a British ~~officer~~ <sup>Agent to</sup> ~~should~~ <sup>received</sup> be installed at Debai.

7. The Govt of India (tel<sup>g</sup> of 2 January 1911) did not favour this suggestion, & considered that the occasional visit to Debai of the Vice-Consul from Lingah, in one of H.M.'s ships, wd suffice "until such cordial relations were re-established as wd justify the location of an "Agent."



'The Debai incident' [45v] (11/24)





'The Debai incident' [46r] (12/24)

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"Agent." They considered that a situation "fraught with dangerous developments" had been created on the Trucial Coast, & that it was essential to reestablish friendly relations without delay, in case other Trucial Chiefs combined with Debai. They advocated a clear intimation being made to the <sup>tubemen</sup> Sheikh at Debai & Chrehees) [that there was no intention of weakening their independence or preventing their own possession of arms.

< see Lt. Cress's tel<sup>g</sup> of 5<sup>th</sup> January 1911

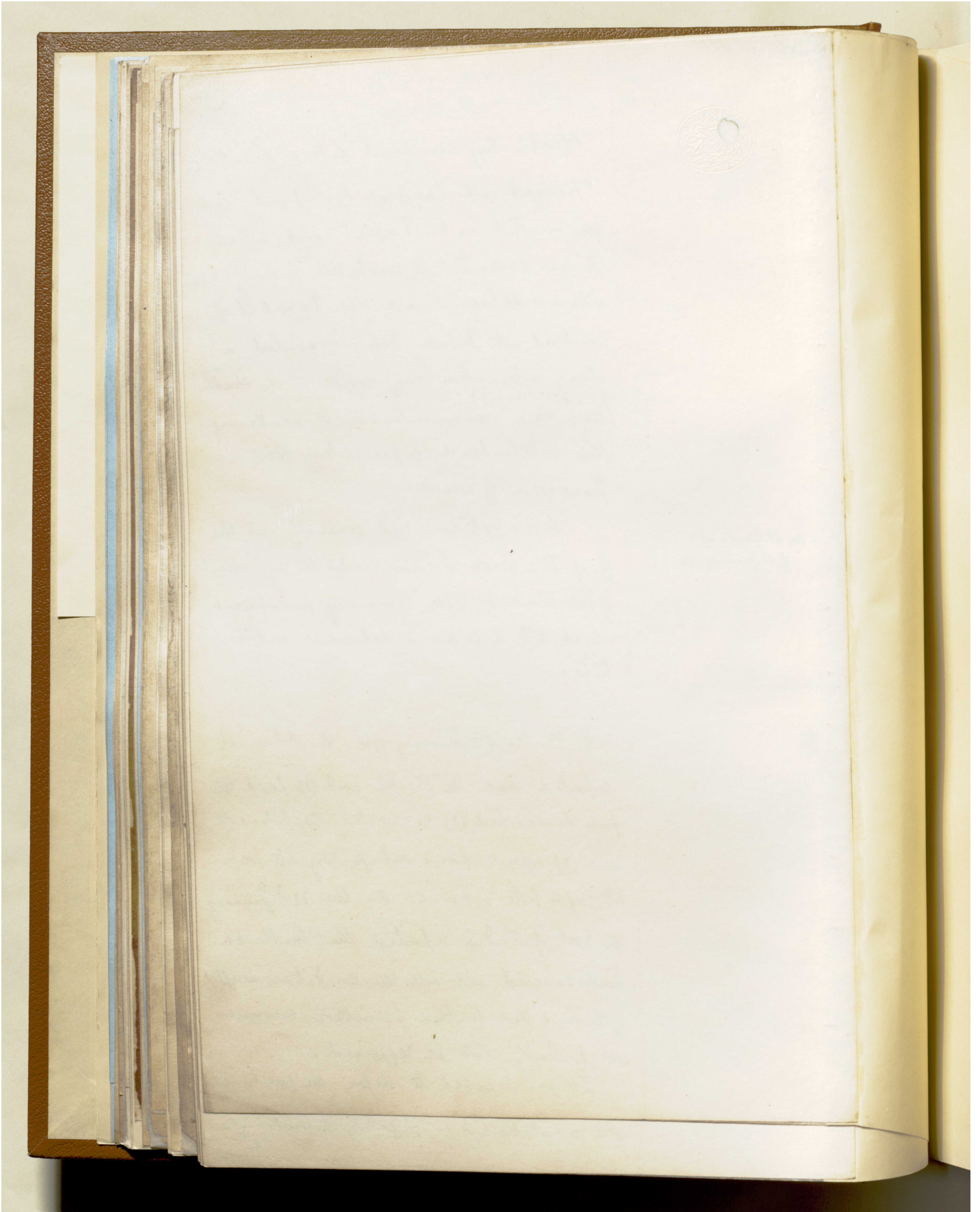
H.M.'s Govt<sup>x</sup> concurred generally in the G. of I.'s views, & considered the requirements of the moment to be "summary punishment," which wd. act as a deterrent on other tribes.

8. On the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1911 the Admiral reported that the Sheikh had (1) paid the fine demanded, (2) re-erected the tide-hole, and (3) agreed upon a satisfactory site for a telegraph pole & house. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> January the Govt of India reported that the Sheikh had carried out all the conditions accepted by him, & that further punitive measures wd. probably not be required.

It was decided to defer the question's



'The Debai incident' [46v] (13/24)





'The Debai incident' [47r] (14/24)

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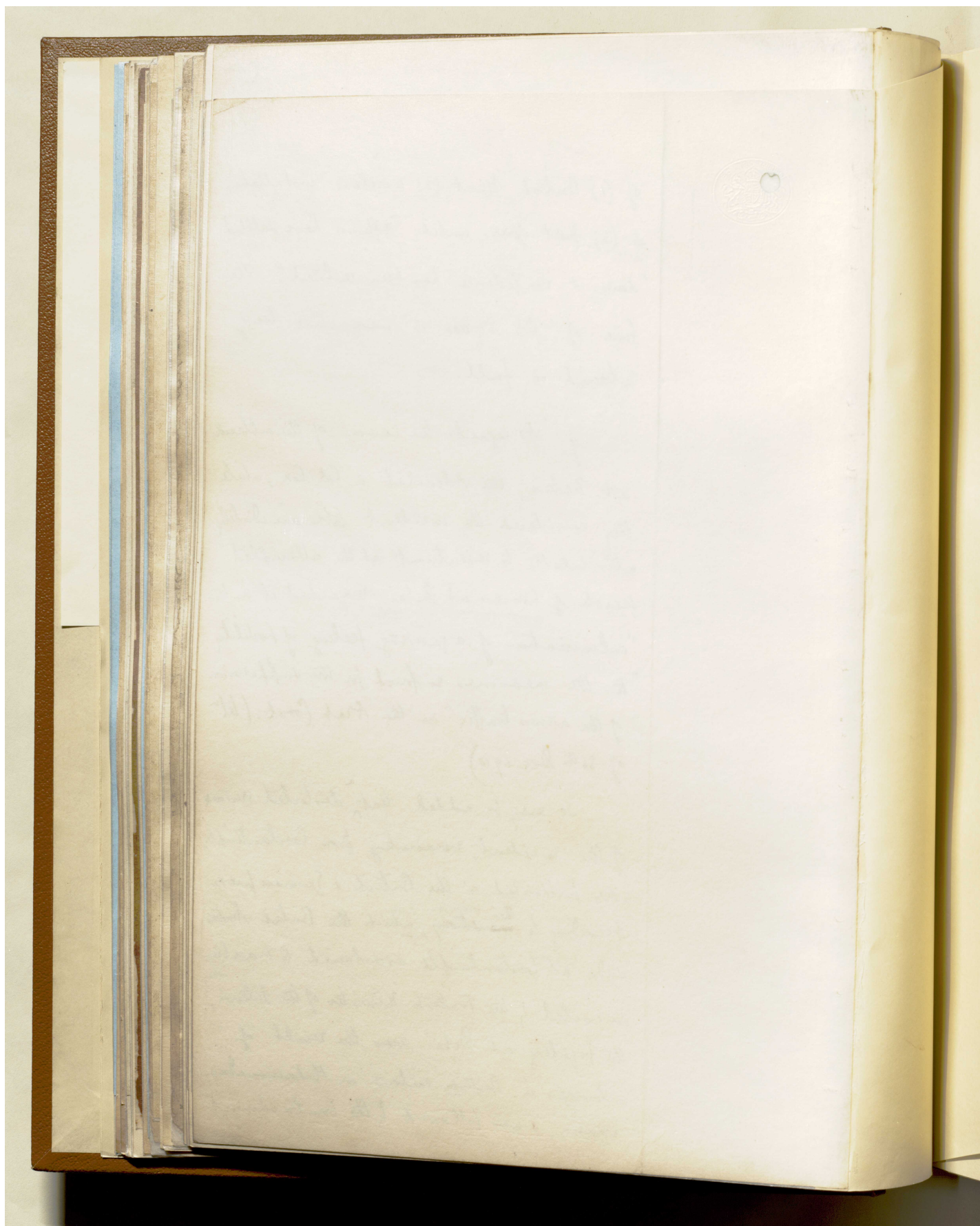
of (1) British Agent (2) wireless installation  
& (3) post office, until "affairs have settled  
down & confidence has been restored". The  
fine of Rs 50,000 is meanwhile being  
retained in full.

g. As regards the cause of the outbreak  
at Debai, the Admiral & Col. Cox, while  
they considered the incident to be immediately  
attributable to resentment at the attempted  
search of houses at Debai, regarded it as the  
"culmination of a growing feeling of hostility  
to the measures enforced for the suppression  
of the arms traffic" on the Arab Coast. (let<sup>r</sup>  
of 30<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1910)

It may be added that, <sup>a</sup>distorted version  
of the incident, emanating from Constantinople,  
was published in the British & German press.  
According to ~~the~~ <sup>this version</sup> story, [which the British Ambas-  
sador at Constantinople ascertained to have been  
concocted by the Turkish Minister of the Interior,  
the fighting at Debai was the result of  
outrages by British sailors on Muhammedan  
vases, & was followed by the bombardment

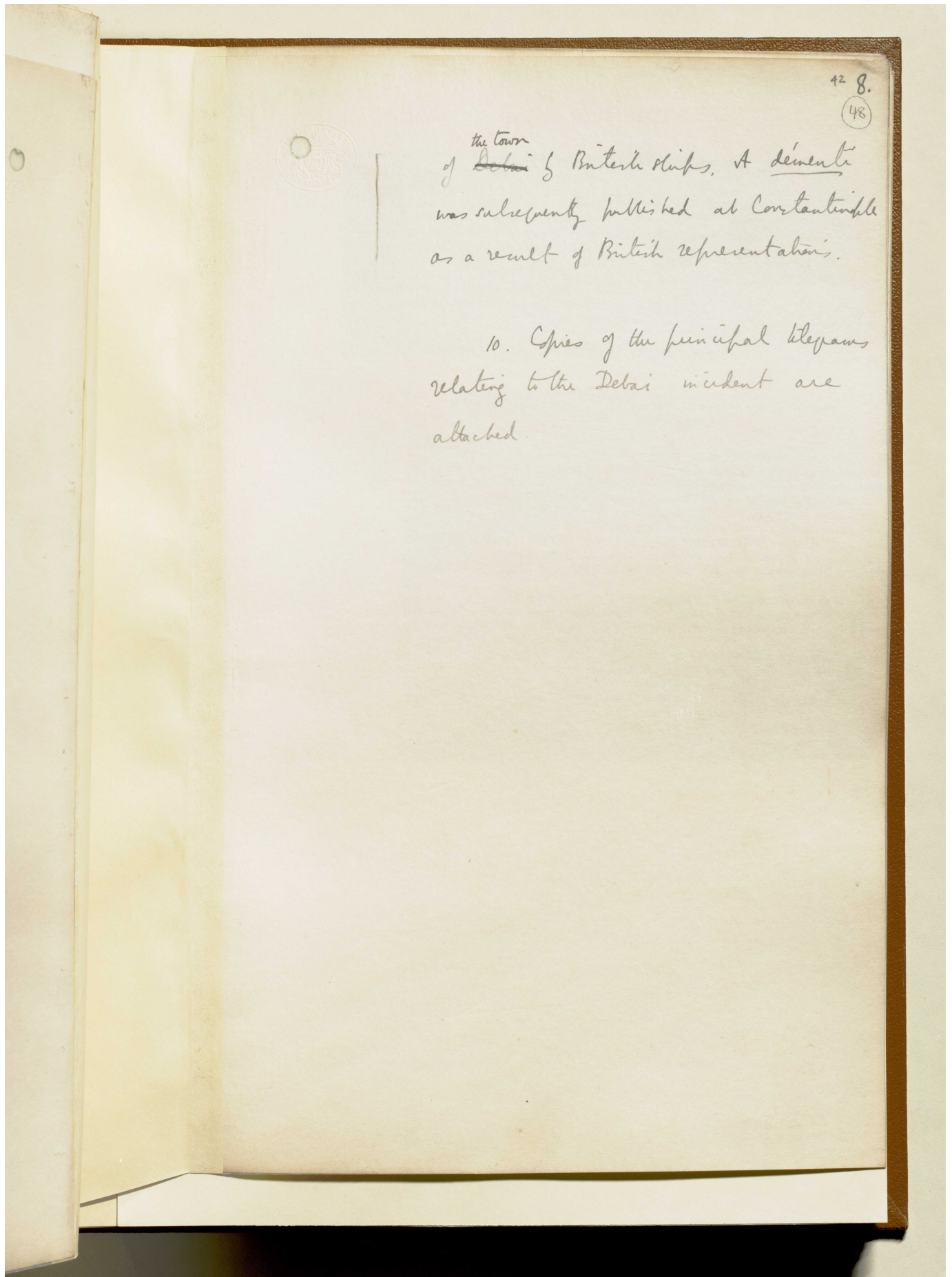


'The Debai incident' [47v] (15/24)





'The Debai incident' [48r] (16/24)

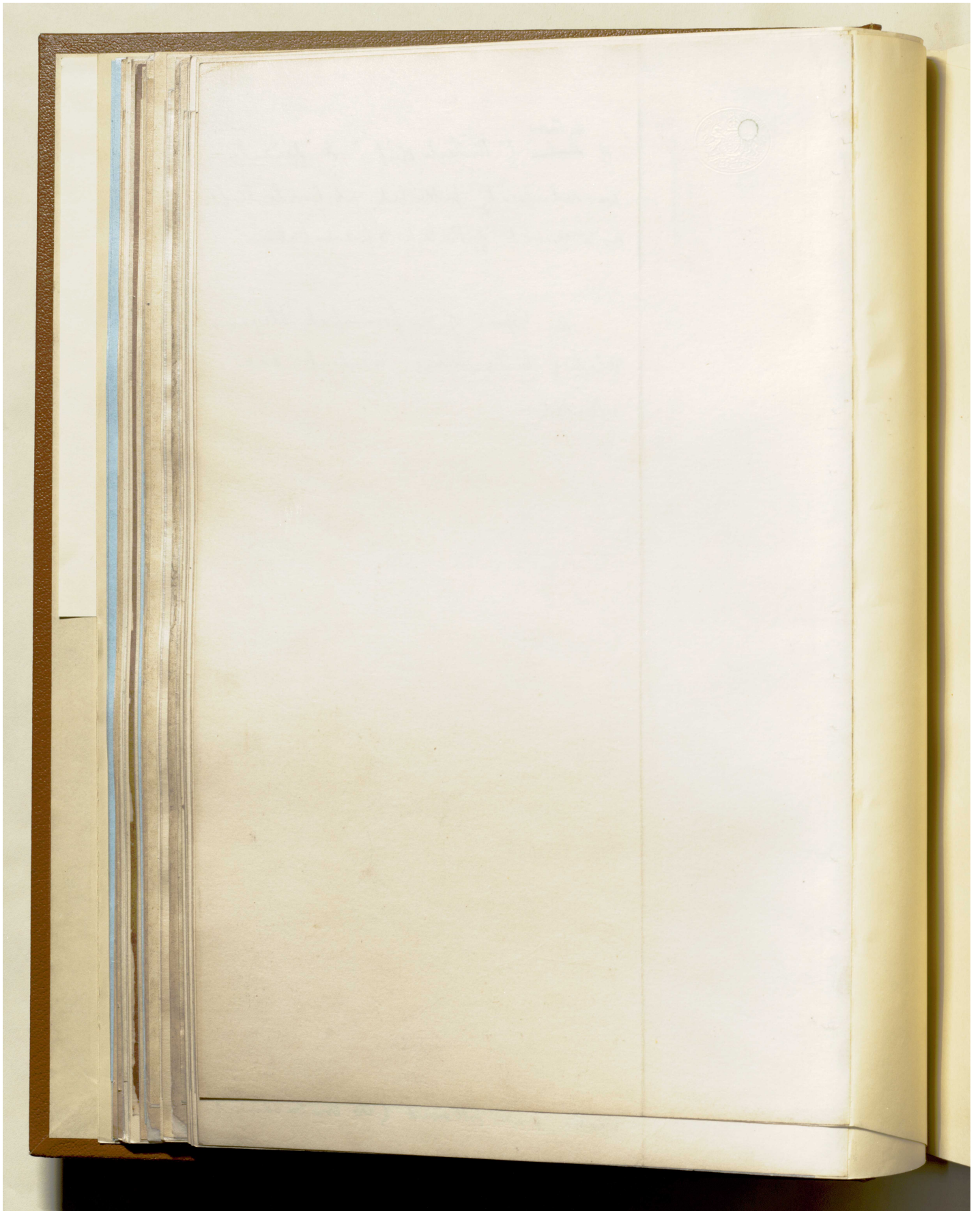


the town  
of ~~Debai~~ of British ships. A démenti  
was subsequently published at Constantinople  
as a result of British representations.

10. Copies of the principal telegrams  
relating to the Debai incident are  
attached.



'The Debai incident' [48v] (17/24)





'The Debai incident' [49r] (18/24)

49 43

Commander-in-chief, East Indies, to Admiralty.  
(No. 228.)  
(Telegraphic.) P. *Bushire, December 25, 1910.*  
REGRET to report party from His Majesty's ship "Hyacinth" landed at Dibai yesterday morning to search for arms, was fired on by natives, and engagement became general, four of our men being killed and nine wounded. One man also is missing. Enemy's loss, thirty-seven killed.  
Party was landed owing to information received that arms intended for exportation were in Dibai in contravention of treaty rights. After fighting began sheikh exerted himself to pacify people.  
Am now at Bushire, but propose leaving for Dibai to-morrow in His Majesty's ship "Odin," retaining the "Hyacinth" there for the present. My telegraphic address will be Jask.  
List of killed and wounded forwarded in separate report.

From Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, to Admiralty, London,  
30th December 1910.

No. 233.

Political Resident and I have carefully gone into cause of fighting (at) Dibai, and we are of opinion it was the culmination of a growing feeling of hostility to the measures enforced for the suppression of arms traffic on this coast. The immediate cause was resentment at the attempted search (of) two houses. On previous recent occasion, on which Sheikh had been asked to have a house searched he did in such a perfunctory way as to make the operation a farce. On the present occasion though called upon by the Commander (of) landing party (to) meet him and search certain houses with support of our men, he failed (to) comply and did not appear until trouble had begun.

The impression conveyed by several reports of British officers is that he allowed trouble to commence, either by apathy or intention, but that when he saw that it had gone too far he exerted himself to stop it and show that he was able to control it when he chose.

The Sheikh came on board "Hyacinth" at Dibai on 28th December under a safe return to interview Political Resident and myself. He altogether repudiated complicity in the firing on our men and alleged that the latter had started the firing. His statements generally were altogether contrary to facts reported by our officers and could not be accepted.

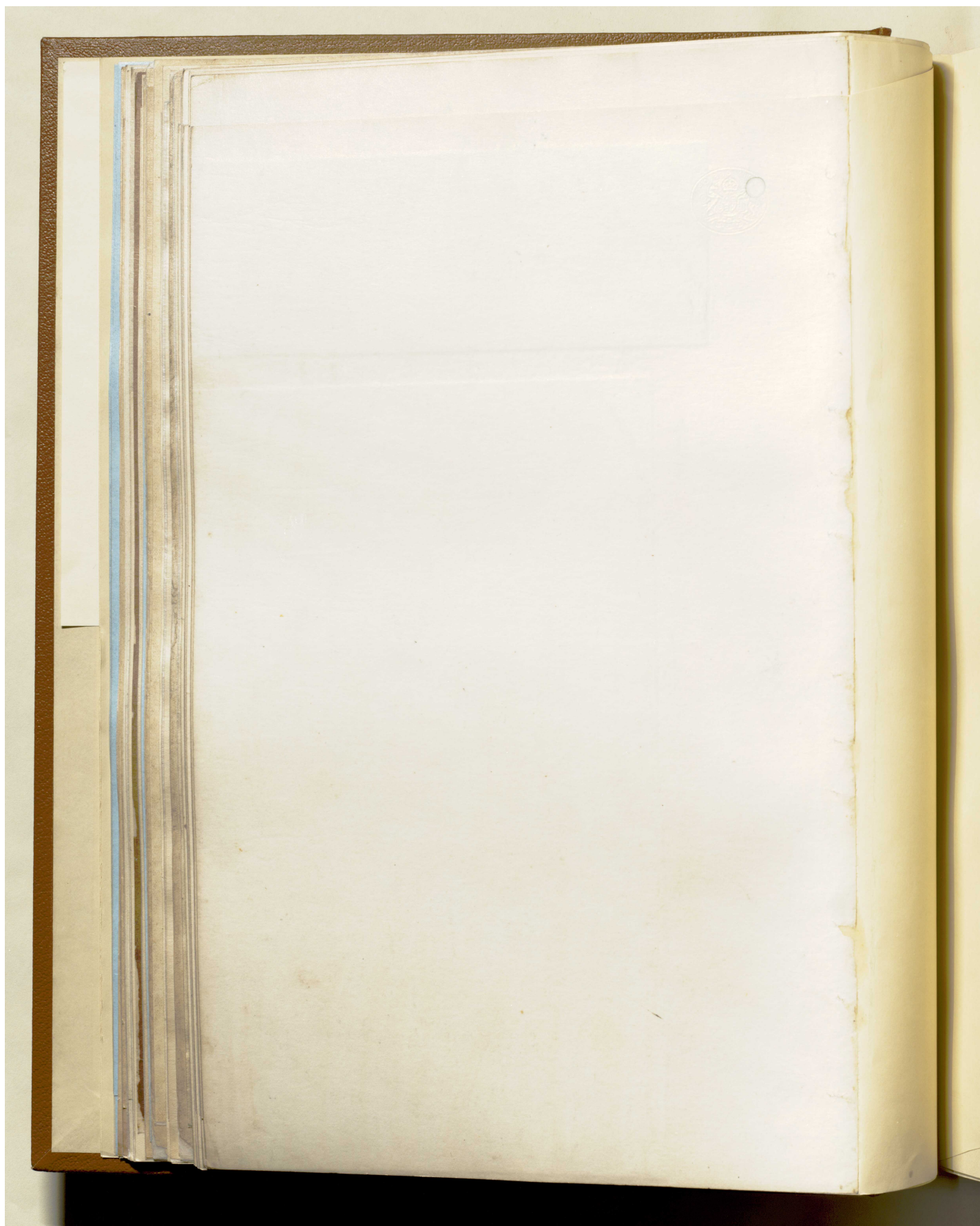
He, having further refused, in spite of explanations, to allow a tide pole to be replaced which had been erected by the officer commanding boat, and which Sheikh had caused to be removed, or agree (to) receive a British officer as Resident's Agent, Dibai, we have accordingly made the following demand on him in writing, and have allowed him 48 hours for compliance, viz. :—

- 1st.—Immediate replacement of the tide pole and retention as long as needed by the officer commanding His Majesty's ship stationed here.
- 2nd.—Accept telegraph installation whenever considered necessary by the Government in accordance with provisions of additional article of the Treaty, 4th May, 1853.
- 3rd.—Delivery of 400 serviceable rifles, to be collected from inhabitants.
- 4th.—Payment of Rs. 50,000 as a fine, to be considered at the disposal of Government, and the retention or restoration of whole or any portion to be affected by his acceptance following two further conditions which, however, are not part of present ultimatum, pending the concurrence of the Government.
- 5th.—Acceptance British officer as an agent, with a small personal guard, and co-operation in finding himself suitable quarters, and according of protection and friendly treatment.
- 6th.—Acquiescence exchange (of) existing primitive and unsatisfactory postal arrangements for a sub post-office of the India Postal Department, as at other ports where steamers call in the Persian Gulf.

Resident and I are convinced that both political, commercial, and arms traffic requirements on the trucial coast demand appointment of a British officer at Dibai. A proper post office is also needed by our traders, and a wireless telegraph installation is indispensable if a British officer is located there. We recommend that we be authorised to take present opportunity to insist Sheikh undertake (to) accept these measures. It will be understood that installation (of) British officer will mean that a sufficient guard must be provided for his safety and wireless telegraphy installed. I have small installation available at once and would propose erect it pending replacement by a more effective one. Copy of this telegram has been sent to Government of India by the Political Resident.



'The Debai incident' [49v] (19/24)





'The Debai incident' [50r] (20/24)

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*From Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, at Henjam, to the Secretary, Admiralty, 1st January 1911.*

No. 234.

With reference to my telegram No. 233, dated 23rd December, regarding position at Dibai. Sheikh has complied with four demands included in ultimatum, and as regards items 5 and 6 informed he must fully understand he will have to accept decision (of) Government without question. He is weak ruler, however, and experience gained by recent incident demonstrates that while not intractable or unfriendly himself, he is coerced by a faction of truculent relatives who are strongly opposed to any inconvenient increase of British influence or domination.

In our opinion it becomes all the more necessary to locate a British Agent here in order to strengthen our hold not only upon Dibai but upon the coast generally. But under the present conditions it is possible that we may find difficulty in installing the Agent without the employment of force, and if that should become necessary it would (be) advisable to have a force of 1,000 men, including artillery and sappers, ready to be sent up if the Sheikh refuses to comply with the demand when it is made. A simple bombardment would have effect of considerably damaging town and pearling fleet and would, to a large extent, destroy value of Dibai as a trading port, but it would not necessarily bring about submission of the tribesmen unless followed up by the disembarkation of a sufficiently strong force to occupy town. We are both of the decided opinion execution of measure is urgently called for before the advent of hot weather and trust Government will see fit to authorise it. Copy of this telegram has been sent to the Government of India by the Political Resident.

*From Secretary of State to Viceroy, 2nd January 1911.*

Foreign Secret. Naval Commander-in-Chief's telegram to Admiralty No. 233, dated 30th December. Debai. What are your views? Very desirable to avoid any action that could cause us to be suspected of intending to interfere in Arabian affairs.

*From Viceroy, 2nd January 1911.*

Foreign Secret. Debai. Please see Naval Commander-in-Chief's telegrams to Admiralty of 30th December and 1st January. I have sent the following telegram to Colonel Cox:—

"No. 3. Government of India are not satisfied with situation that has arisen at Debai. They gather from your telegram of 30th December that the house-search took place without the presence of Sheikh. If this is so, action of Commander was hardly prudent, and was likely to provoke reprisals. They think some of conditions imposed onerous, such as imposition of fine of Rs. 50,000, and that Government of India should have been first consulted. They do not approve idea of installing a British Agent at Debai by bombardment, and the employment of a force of 1,000 men, since it might become impossible to remove them without danger to the Agent. They consider an occasional visit of Vice-Consul from Lingah in one of His Majesty's ships would suffice until such cordial relations were re-established as would justify location of an Agent. Situation has been created on truculent coast that may be fraught with dangerous developments, and object originally in view was hardly worth the risk. In any case situation requires careful handling lest the other Chiefs should combine with the Sheikh of Debai, and it is very desirable that friendly relations should be restored with the least possible delay. If it has not already been done, Government of India think that it should be clearly explained to the tribesmen at Debai, as elsewhere, that they have no intention of weakening their independence, or of preventing their own possession of arms, their only object being to stop export of arms to Persia, in which course they are acting as Agents of the Persian Government, and at their request."



'The Debai incident' [50v] (21/24)





'The Debai incident' [51r] (22/24)

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*From Secretary of State Viceroy, 5th January 1911.*

Foreign Secret. Your telegram of 2nd instant. Debai. His Majesty's Government concur generally in views expressed in your telegram to Cox, and agree entirely with your disapproval of installation of British Agent by bombardment and armed force. Requirement of moment seems to be summary punishment and cash compensation, but not political compensation of a kind that would inevitably give rise to suspicions of our ulterior motives. It is further desirable that punishment should be such as to act as deterrent on other tribes. Difficulty remains as to action to be taken if Sheikh fails within reasonable time to fulfil conditions he has accepted. What action would you propose in this connection? In view of loss of life, fine by way of pecuniary compensation should be as large as is consistent with Sheikh's capacity for payment. As regards arms traffic on crucial coast reliance must be placed on vigilance of His Majesty's ships to prevent Debai and other ports being used for purposes of illicit trade.

*Commander-in-chief, East Indies, to Admiralty.*

(Telegraphic.) P.

*Jask, January 5, 1911.*

THE general situation at Dibai is satisfactory; sheikh has duly paid indemnity, and re-erected the tide-pole. A satisfactory site for telegraph pole and house 600 yards south of the town has been agreed upon.

*From Viceroy, 8th January 1911.*

Foreign Secret. Your telegram of 5th January. Debai. Following from Cox, dated 6th January:—

"I find it difficult to reply satisfactorily to the several points touched upon in your telegram S. 3 of 3rd January, but I am hopeful that full report mailed on 2nd January will place situation in a more favourable light and remove apprehension. I am writing again by this post giving further information on the points needing it, and trust that the Government of India will suspend conclusions pending receipt. Meanwhile, wireless reports from Senior Naval Officer, since we left, show position at Debai and attitude of Sheikh and give cause for satisfaction. I may mention that the Sheikhs Shargah and Umm-el-Kaiwaim cooperated with us in advising Sheikh of Debai in the right direction."

*From Viceroy, 23rd January 1911.*

Foreign Secret. Your telegram dated 5th January. Debai. Sheikh has carried out conditions which he accepted, and further punitive measures will probably not be required. I have informed Cox that question of installation of British Agent, wireless installation, and post office, must be deferred until affairs have settled down and confidence has been restored. Meanwhile Rs. 50,000 [paid?] will be retained in full.



'The Debai incident' [51v] (23/24)





'The Debai incident' [back] (24/24)

