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LETTER FROM ALGIERS

JULY 2

IT is doubtful whether any national capital, even Saigon or Santo Domingo, has undergone more turmoil during the last two weeks than this one. The military coup that overthrew President Ahmed Ben Bella on June 19th, and also overthrew the second Afro-Asian Conference, which was scheduled to take place here between June 24th and July 5th, may have indefinitely delayed the development of an economically independent Algeria and also indefinitely set back the cause of so-called Afro-Asian solidarity—events (or non-events) whose repercussions could affect the relations of the nonaligned African and Asian nations with Peking, Moscow, and Washington for a long time. The conference, which was to have been the first such gathering since the initial one, in Bandung, Indonesia, in the spring of 1955, has been rescheduled to begin here on October 28th, but a considerable number of disgruntled delegates, having come thousands of miles for what turned out to be a fiasco, are not so sure they will try again, and those who prudently decided to stay away this time, including representatives of most of the politically moderate French-speaking African nations and of the African and Asian members of the British Commonwealth, are now highly reluctant to come at all. Beyond the question of whether there should have been any attempt to hold the conference so soon after a violent political upheaval are the question of future relations between the two unwieldy blocs of Asian and African countries, on the one hand, and the question of cooperation within each bloc. What appeared ten years ago to be an international development of considerable historical significance—the bringing together of the old and new nations of Asia with the fledgling nations of Africa to take a stand against the dying colonialism of Western Europe and against “imperialism” in general—has turned into a vague and complicated business that at the moment is creating more political problems than it is settling. For one thing, “imperialism” has acquired a new meaning as a term of opprobrium, and some of the new nations now employ it against each



other as violently as they once did against their European overlords. Also, the spectrum has shifted as the principles of economic regionalism and bilateralism have been developed, and in this context the color of skin on occasion seems to have become less important than the color of money. Somewhat ironically, Algeria, despite its previous shrill anti-imperialist protestations, was at the time of the coup about to conclude a monumental four-hundred-million-dollar cooperative industrial-development agreement with France—an arrangement that in conventional left-wing circles could surely have been described as the epitome of neo-colonialism. Algeria, one of many African countries that have achieved independence since Bandung, belongs to the large company of “underdeveloped” nations that are now discovering something the Western states learned painfully during the centuries of their own development: that while the equality of nations is a pleasant concept, some nations always turn out to be more equal than others; power and prestige are variable and often treacherous; and man’s capacity for divisive debate is greater than his capacity for harmony.

WHAT has been happening in Algiers would make an ideal scenario for the combined talents of Mack Sennett, David O. Selznick, and Alfred Hitchcock. Preparations for the conference were immense and expensive, costing the Algerians eighteen million dollars, and the scenes that preceded its collapse were reminiscent of a Keystone comedy, with delegates dashing pell-mell all over town wrangling and shouting. The meetings should actually be opened and playing diplomatic bargaining games with each

other until all the foreign representatives (there were eight hundred), and all the correspondents as well (five hundred), were thoroughly confused. Then, on June 25th, part of the fancy brand-new conference hall, called Le Club des Pins, was blown up, apparently by supporters of Ben Bella, and the next day the embarrassed Algerians announced that the meeting was cancelled. During this

wild week, most of Algiers was playing out its own mystery drama, which might have been entitled “Ben Bella Vanishes.” After the deposed President was whisked from his home in the middle of the night, there arose the questions of just what his fate would be and what course the Algerian “socialist revolution” would now take. These matters are not likely to be decided right away; in fact, the consensus is that it may be several months, at least, before the revolutionary path is re-charted. Meanwhile, as the city writhes in a summer sirocco, and the hotels, restaurants, and shops curse their luck (especially since a big youth conference set for Algiers late in July has also been postponed), the predominant atmosphere is one of anticlimax and uncertainty.

Some people here predict that the coup, led by the austere and taciturn Colonel Houari Boumedienne, who, as Vice-President and Defense Minister, was Ben Bella’s closest associate, may be the first of several upheavals, exposing Algeria to the kind of chaos that has beset South Vietnam in the last two years—although the Algerians, fortunately for them, are not engaged in a colonial or a fratricidal war. Others say that while there is bound to be considerable jockeying for position in the new regime, the Army will easily maintain full control. The new ruling body, the twenty-six-man Algerian Revolutionary Council, insists that the nation’s policies, both internal and external, will be no different from what they were under Ben Bella—that Algeria will now simply “implement and rationalize” its revolution and get it back on the track of “democratic centralism.” Obviously hurt by the adverse reaction of some Communist countries, notably Russia and Cuba, to