



**NATIVE OF MAURETANIA:** He goes to Dakar to sell trinkets, trudging over miles of rough country to reach the market



**A FRENCH COLONIST** strikes a bargain with a native cart driver in Dakar, where taxis and other motor transport are now out of date because of petrol shortage. The horse rules again



**BELLE OF DAKAR:** She chews a limewood stick, which from time to time she rubs vigorously over her teeth and gums

## LIBERIA AND THE MYSTERY OF DAKAR

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)

SO that "Second Front" is to begin this year—at least so Radio Paris says! And its chosen site is — French West Africa! As evidence in support, Radio Paris points to the presence of American troops in Liberia, to the addition of 50,000 white French soldiers to Dakar's normal 10,000 European population, to a 700-mile British raid from Lake Chad to Benghazi—and to the map. Dakar, that map proclaims, is, militarily considered, four things: The ideal Axis springboard for air attack on South America, here only 1800 miles distant; the perfect fuel-base for a submarine noose by which to strangle "Britain's Life-Passage" down the Atlantic to India and Egypt; a possible "Eastern Hawaii" protecting America's entire Atlantic coastline; and the land-and-sea security for a direct overland route to Egypt across Africa's waist.

But behind these strategic considerations which we all see instantly these days as if by effortless instinct, French West Africa is for most of us a map blank; Liberia is a name—if that; while Dakar, for all the miles of comment written about it these last two years, remains a strangely impalpable place for a world-pivot. We never meet anyone who has been there. And rumour—de Gaulle's débacle of September, 1940, the convict-built trans-Sahara railway, German "Fifth Column" domination, etc., etc.—creates only the bafflement of an incomplete jigsaw.

However, I happen to work alongside a man who has been in Dakar, I have encountered eye-witness accounts

of the railway-camps and of de Gaulle's strange "flop"; and I have cross-checked against each other the still more recent impressions of American business visitors. Here are my siftings.

### A City of Peanuts

Dakar is built on peanuts. As your ship approaches its low white houses, they rise in hills along the docksides. As you cross Cap Verde's peninsula-neck proceeding up country they pass you on camelback and donkeyback in long strung-out caravans.



And as you try to sleep, the whirr of the double-shift shelling-machines drives you to distraction—or to the brewery that is, save them, the only factory in the city. For a little city it is, with a normal population nearly that of Dunedin and a swollen one to-day as large as Wellington. But only one man in seven who passes you is white, though all are legal and loyal Frenchmen, electing their Negro deputy to the Parliament in Paris. The climate is steaming rain for six months from a never-

blue sky, followed by a pleasant semester of winter. And since one cannot live on nut-oil, the region is fed almost wholly from overseas — rice (in the past), from Indo-China, everything else from Marseilles.

From Dakar's backdoor stretches, right across to the other side of Africa, the enormous grass belt called the Sudan. To-day it supports 50,000,000 Africans. Some day it may be the ranch and the wheatfield of Europe. Across the Senegal River, 150 miles to the north, the Sudan fades into the bare rock and sand of the Sahara, which, also Africa-wide, cuts it off completely—except by sea via Dakar and by two recent roads to Timbuctu—from the fertile Frenchified Mediterranean Coast. It is also cut off from the sea to the south—this time by jungle. The Sudan grassland ends, in fact, right on the crest of the hills which follow round the Coast of Guinea at 100-200 miles distance. A succession of

British, French, Portuguese, and American Guineas occupies their wet, malarial seaward slope.

### Firestone's Negro Republic

Yes, I wrote "American." For Liberia began life as a real official colony of freed slaves from U.S.A. And today, 120 years later, the only independent State left in Africa, a member of the League of Nations, and a Negro Republic in which Caucasians may neither vote nor hold property, Liberia is still in effect, a dependency of the United States. When, many years ago, Harvey Firestone leased its best million acres to grow his tyres, the loan he raised was backed by Washington as a Federal Security. And to-day, when "protective invasions" and the like are revealing the vast gulf between Great

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**"DAKAR IS BUILT ON PEANUTS":** A riverside mound of peanuts, awaiting shipment at Dakar for Marseilles, looks like a desert sand-dune