INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JBG-18
Telegraph Lineman

Makerere College
Kampala, Uganda
East Africa
10 March 1959

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 18, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When you are driving from town to town along one of East Africa's dirt roads, you can usually find your way, when branching tracks lead off in various directions, by following the telegraph line. Widely spaced iron poles with white insulators, and one, two or more bare copper strands point to the next settlement; and in many instances they represent that settlement's only expedient contact with the outside world. When a sudden downpour washes out a bridge or culvert, or when seasonal rains turn the road into rust-colored soup, any message that moves faster than a native runner must go by telegraph, or by substitute telephone.

The vulnerability of wire communication is probably as great here as any place. The wires are not in much danger from tall bodied trucks or mechanical cranes on wheels, and there is not much bother over farm boys using the white insulators for small caliber rifle practice. But trees are constantly falling across them, elephants have a way of curiously grabbing with their trunks, giraffe often snap the strands, and the bright copper of course has a strong appeal to the bush native's love for costume jewelry and glitter. To the district officer in an out of the way place, with only a few native police of questionable loyalty to protect him in time of emergency, the telegraph line is a convenience rather than an element of security. Radio would be better.

Telegraphic communication throughout East Africa (Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda) has been centrally administered since 1933. The East African Posts and Telegraphs Department, administered by the East African High Commission, is the agency ultimately responsible for the operation and upkeep of the lines.

There is a good deal of complaint against the slowness and the inaccuracy of the service, and in a limited period of observation most any American or Englishman will realize that mistakes are frequent and that telegrams need to be carefully worded to avoid garbling. At a higher level, the current inability of the telegraph service - along with the postal and telephone services - to pay for itself is being argued in the Central and Territorial legislatures. There is talk of raising the rate (from one shilling for the first ten words and ten EA cents per word thereafter) and even more talk of getting money from the three territorial governments to make up the heavy deficits which exist.[1] To support the

1. Such as £200,000 due employees for accumulated leave.

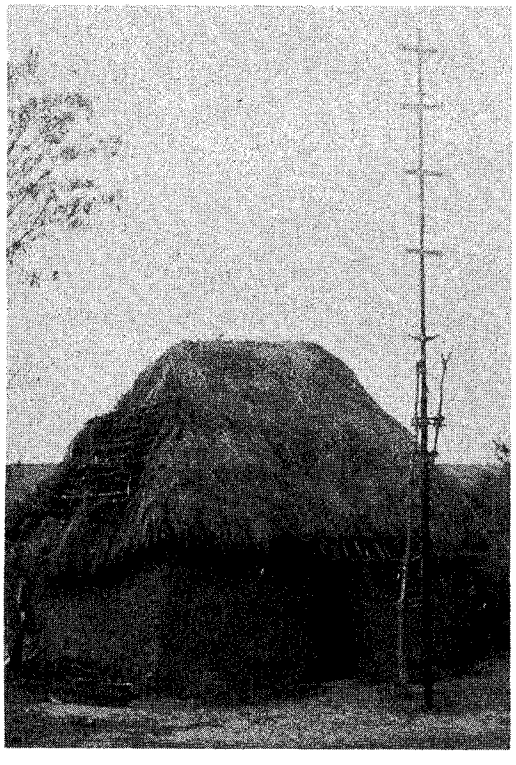
plea for funds the Postmaster General explains that to the best of his knowledge the East African Posts and Telegraphs Department is the only such self-financing organization in the world. He implies that the job of operating, maintaining, and expanding is too much to undertake without outside capital loans or gifts.

Reading of the legislative debates in the East African Standard gives a fair idea of the trouble the Department is having at the top. Travelling through the back areas and making only ordinary use of the telegraph system soon provides a picture of difficulties at the lowest level - where a corps of Asiatic, African, and European clerks, laborers, and minor officers face the job of keeping the wires in one piece. Here the peculiar conditions of East Africa make themselves evident: the telegraph poles have to be of metal or termites will tunnel them; sounder magnets, terminals, connections have to be made especially corrosion proof for the seasonal damp; telegraph offices and the housing of personnel sometimes depend on the presence of a few mud walls and a tin or thatch roof. And probably the most restricting item of all is that the operator, lineman, and laborer tasks must be performed, to a large degree, by natives one generation removed from the iron age.

One such native is Selemani bin Bakari, a lineman I met at his post some 62 miles south of Bukoba, Tanganyika. He tends the line leading from Bukoba south to Biharamulo, and is responsible for 36 miles of it. He does not know his exact age (as is the case with most natives) but is about 45, having served with the telegraphs line for 26 years - 18 years at his present post, a village of four huts called Mnyamwezi. His salary, 70 shillings, is the equivalent of ten dollars per month. As wages in this area go this is a large amount, allowing him to live at a standard far higher than his neighbors, with three young wives and a larger number of goats. Also, he can afford to wear a khaki shirt and shorts and a felt Moslem fez. He is fairly happy with his lot, except that he holds something of a grudge against his three wives for having provided him with only three surviving children. He would like to have more.

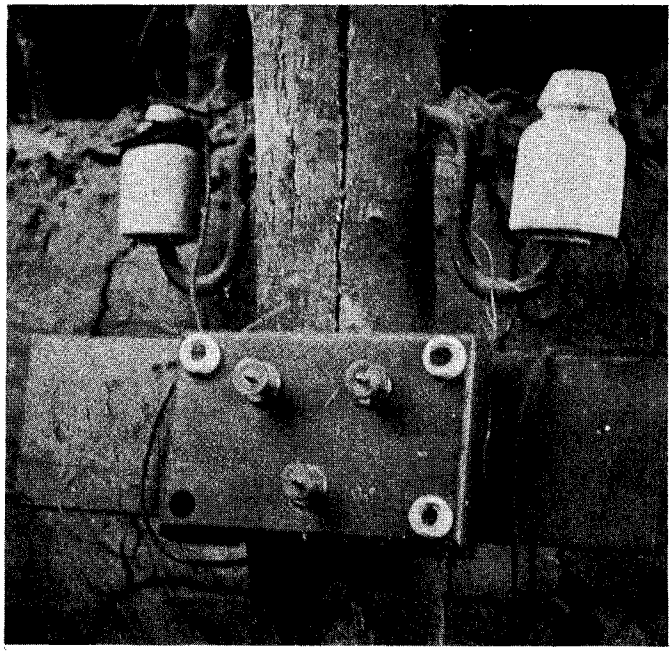
His equipment for repairing the wire - a single strand only - includes a pair of pliers, a screwdriver, some spare wire and insulators. For testing he has an army field telephone in a leather box, ruggedly made in the pre-

plastics days, marked STECO DIV 1918. In an emergency he can use the telephone, wired on ground-return, for calling the telegraph operator at Bukoba or Biharamulo.



He had done this the day I met him, ringing up the operator at Biharamulo and, after long waiting and much scrambling in the Biharamulo post office with an extra, ancient series of Galvanic cells, managed to shout that an elephant had come during the night to raid his banana plot and eat the thatch off his roof. And would the operator please beg the District Commissioner to come down and shoot the elephant, since this was the third night it had raided the village?

It was a little more than a two hours drive before we arrived at the crudely-laddered post and the 18' by 18' mud hut. The rains had set in early and the road was unusually muddy for Christmas time. The hut was somewhat better than the ordinary living-hut; the walls were cracking but well-wattled and the dirt floor was well packed. Inside there was a frame bench of tied sticks, made for a man to lie on, and at the head a large post was driven into the floor - a crude support for the tiny terminal panel. The panel had three binding posts, presumably the broken ends of the wire and a ground connection. Outdoor type insulators were provided on the post, the thatched roof being only a partial guarantee against wetting.



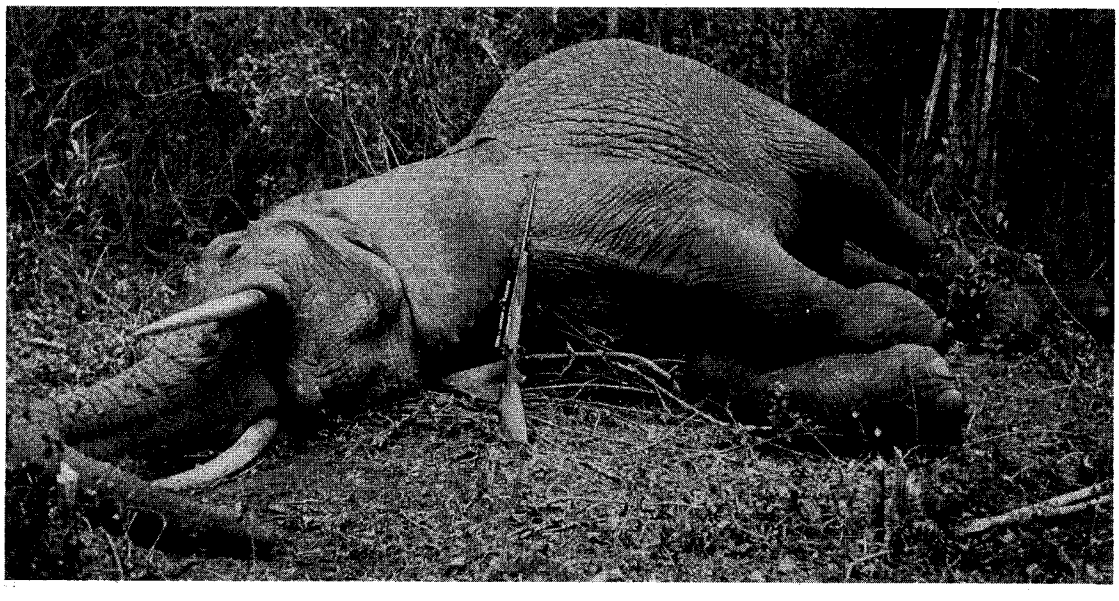
While we were looking at this, the lineman came out of his quarters, a hut of similar size and construction just across the road. His face, like that of most natives, really gave no clue of mentality or character. But since I appraised it through the veil of my own culture and experience I saw a blend of

stupidity, apathy, a few signs of simple hedonism, and the usual native good humor and readiness to laugh. He took us around his little compound and pointed out the damage done by the elephants.

Most of one side of the roof had been eaten away, and a good deal of damage had been done to the banana plot. One wall of the hut had been weakened where the elephant had put his weight against it. The

District Commissioner's first question, with an amused grin, was whether or not anyone had been sleeping in the lineman's hut while the roof was being eaten off. The answer was a wide-eyed denial, and an explanation that they had all been in the house across the road, afraid to move or to make a sound while they could hear the tearing of the thatch and the banana plants and the belly rumblings of the elephant. The elephant, a single, small male, had ambled about the banana plot for an hour, browsing and chewing very audibly. In defense of his having failed to yell or beat a drum to frighten the animal away, Bakari gave the usual reasons of spirit and witchcraft. His tribe the Mnyamwezi, of this area on the border of Bukoba and Biharamulo districts, has the same regard for the supernatural as most East African tribes; when an animal visits and damages a shamba at night it is regarded as the action of someone from the spirit world.

We found the tracks leading out of the banana plot, and three of us - a local tracker, the D.C. and myself-followed the elephant for about an hour, through the tangled, heavy bush and vine growth of a little valley. We came on it suddenly, saw its back and moving trunk through the cover at about fifty yards. It caught our wind; and as it reared its head it gave me an easy brain shot. It was a young, prime bull with ivory twenty pounds each side. There was the



usual celebration while the tusks were being chopped out - the usual flattery which any white man can obtain (a sort of Godhood) by killing an animal now and then. And it was taken for granted that this would be the end of the elephant raids here.

But it was not. That night (in way of revenge, according to Bakari) the whole herd came, ate some more thatch, pulled down his mango trees and tossed the roots up on the hut tops. So I returned the next morning, tracked the whole herd into some even worse cover and killed two more bulls. I didn't want to kill two, but after I had fired the one shot for punishment's sake two of the bulls, one rather large and carrying heavy ivory, turned and came at me in

either fear or anger. I had to kill the big one to turn them off the narrow, confined jungle path which led them straight to me.

I had to return to Kampala the next day, so it was a couple of months before I saw Bakari again. In the meantime, back in the big city, I could listen with a knowing amusement to European gin-time comment regarding the "shockingly bad" telegraph service and the "fantastic laziness and inefficiency" of the Posts and Telegraphs workmen. And it was a lesser irritation now, to find that a line was down somewhere and service would be held up for a day or so.

When I did see Bakari again, when Dr. Young of the Carnegie party was with me in the truck, there was no shining welcome in his eyes. He pointed to his house, across from the lineman's hut. It too was without thatch: the elephants now were coming every night, sometimes shaking the walls, and his bananas were all eaten and the plants broken down. It would probably anger the herd even more, but would I stop now and kill some more of them?

No, I wouldn't. I did not have permission, nor time, and anyway I had resolved not to shoot any more elephant except trophy bulls on my own licence. I liked elephant, and wanted them to go on living in fair numbers. When they grow to be big bulls, with fine tusks, they make fine and spicily-unsafe sport.

We drove on, leaving Bakari there with his three young wives, his roofless huts, his lethargic diet of posho or corn meal, the tsetse flies, and the perhaps incongruous obligation of keeping intact the thirty-six miles of bright copper strand.

Sincerely,

John B George

John B. George

Completed, mailed 20 May 1951

Received New York 6/4/51