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SUDAN

#### COMMERCE MINISTER DISCUSSES DEVELOPMENT PLAN, OBJECTIVES

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[Interview with Minister of Cooperation, Trade and Supply Faruq Ibrahim al-Maqbul by Sabakr Abu al-Dhahab: "The Economic Program Has Succeeded in Setting Forth Foundations Which Have Inspired Many People's Interest"; date and place not specified]

[Text] Four years have passed since the declaration of the economic concentration and fiscal reform plan in May 1978. During this period, which, by all standards, is to be considered the central period in the Sudanese economy, a number of executive measures were taken which have had a direct and indirect effect on the daily life of the citizen.

Although the program met with broad interest from all elements of the Sudanese people, questions on the economic problem, its nature, the measures which were adopted, ways to extricate oneself from the problem and others, are still being raised in various circles.

In order to learn about the nature of this problem, we held the following discussion with Mr Faruq Ibrahim al-Maqbul, minister of cooperation, trade and supply. The man has the status of an economic school, as well as the fact that he held the position of minister of state for finance and economic planning during the period of the study, preparation and proclamation of the economic concentration and fiscal reform program.

His excellency dealt with the problem in all its dimensions, the measures which have been carried out for the sake of reform, and the positive features which have been achieved so far.

The discussion with his excellency also dealt with the subject of high prices and general imports policy, in addition to everything that has been raised regarding current policy on the distribution of main commodities in the capital and the relationship between commercial policy and local industry. Let us proceed with the discussion.

#### The Economic Problem

[Question] People are talking a great deal about the economic problem, and this issue has constantly been raised on a number of occasions. What is the problem?

The minister replied,

"In reality, we, like other developing and advanced countries, are facing a number of economic difficulties whose causes might be domestic or the result of interactions in the international economy in which we do not have a hand.

"For example, we must all remember that we started intensified development in the mid-seventies and the decision was taken to consider that development is the means to get rid of the problem of poverty and satisfy citizens' needs.

"Development in the Sudan does not mean the establishment of productive projects alone. It means the establishment of infrastructures such as roads, energy, communications and transportation in a vast country which did not experience great volumes of investment in the past.

"Consequently we have started to make massive investments whose volume exceeds everyone's imagination. These have not been in keeping with our domestic savings or the volume of money flowing in from abroad. In spite of our paucity of revenues, we have followed the program of intensifying investments in all areas, whether in the construction of economic structures or productive projects.

"Naturally the experiment has entailed many positive features and of course we have faced many negative ones.

"Owing to the paucity of revenues, officials during this period resorted to indebtedness to the banking system to create additional local revenues. They also resorted to foreign indebtedness to create revenues to finance the hard currency components of these investments.

"A rise in the rates of inflation, an abnormal increase in demand for goods and services, scarcities, long lines and protracted shortages resulted from the expanded indebtedness to the banking system.

"Of course the foreign indebtedness has created debts that have to be paid, and these have come to more than \$5 billion, as our brother the minister of finance has declared.

"It was necessary to review this expansionist policy, it was necessary to evaluate the situation, and it was necessary to devise policies which would restore internal and foreign balance to the domestic economy, help reduce the rates of inflation, solve the masses' problems by providing necessary commodities and basic services, and absorb the available surplus cash in the citizens' possession. We must point to a basic fact, which is that all developing countries that have decided to start development at high rates must face this sort of problem and must innovate corrective policies to remedy these problems at some stage.

"Let us not forget, either, that the start of investment in the Sudan was accompanied by a rise in oil prices, a rise in the inflation rates in the markets we deal with and a wave of recession and increased employment rates; these have undoubtedly had an effect on our export capacity and increased our import bills, and that has had a negative effect on foreign accounts.

"While we are talking about foreign accounts, we must innovate policies which will restore internal balance in a way that will be reflected positively on the foreign accounts. This is a fixed economic view, since we cannot have a deficit in domestic transactions and expect equilibrium in the balance of payments."

Reform Policies and the Goals Which Have Been Achieved

Question: If this was the problem, what policies have been followed to correct it? What is your appraisal of the goals which have been achieved?

His excellency said,

"Of course we all know that the reform started in May 1978 when the economic concentration and fiscal reform program was announced, then followed by other programs, the latest of which was the basic program for economic revival, which is to be considered an advanced step of the first program.

"This program included the following general bases:

"1. An increase in revenues and a reduction in spending, in other words the creation of real surpluses in order to finance investments and services, to arrive at internal balance.

"2. A reduction in reliance on borrowing from the banking system and recourse to this borrowing within limits that are compatible with increases in national product.

"This must also lie within the context of the attainment of internal balance, the reduction of inflation rates and the reduction of domestic demand.

"3. The refusal to enter into new projects, in order to reduce additional commitments, the completion of existing projects, and emphasis on solving problems related to such basic production sectors as energy, transportation and communications.

"4. Use of idle capacity in the sectors of industry and agriculture, with the objective of increasing production and the supply of goods, not just for domestic consumption but also to create an export surplus.

"5. Pursuit of a flexible foreign policy to increase the supply of goods in order to arrive at a solution to the masses' problems and get rid of bottlenecks.

"Consequently, the program, in brief, was aimed at increasing production and raising real national product growth rates.

"It had the goal of combatting inflation and reducing the rates of annual price increase. It had the goal of reforming foreign accounts and creating new foreign currency revenues

"To achieve these goals, the economic strategy, which in my opinion is clear, included the following:

"1. Creation of a realistic price policy to guide consumption, provide incentives for production and help in focussing the growth of the domestic economy on increased exports and consequently increased foreign currency revenues which could be used to solve the problems of production, on behalf of greater production and the increased flow of goods into the market, which would help stabilize domestic prices.

"2. Pursuit of a sound financial and fiscal policy which would help reduce spending, limit unnecessary expansion in the money supply and reduce recourse to the creation of illusory revenues by means of indebtedness to the banking sector - in other words, the printing of money at rates in excess of the real increase in national product.

"3. Attainment of a realistic exchange rate for the Sudanese pound and liberation of domestic and foreign trade from monopolistic restrictions and bureaucratic control.

"We know the corrective policies which were adopted. Economists might differ on the positive features which were realized, as they occupy different schools on that. I do not deny that the experiment entailed negative features, like any economic policy that is applied in any developing country.

"However, in spite of the application, or the commencement of the application, of a project to rationalize and organize jobs in the first year of the program, and its completion in the second year, the financial burdens that were added and the additional demand that was created, I believe that the program was a success in basic areas which have become accepted and have started to be the object of attention and discussion. Of these I might mention:

"First, one must pay attention to the rate of growth of the money supply. In other words, it is necessary to attain a rate of increase that is in keeping with the real growth in the domestic economy.

"We actually succeeded in reducing this rate from 44 percent in 1976-77 to 21 percent at the end of the fiscal year 1979-80.

"The rate increased by stages as a result of structural reforms and the modification of the exchange rate to 50 percent.

"We then restored equilibrium, and the money supply registered an increase at about 19 percent in the period from July 1981 to March 1982; by the end of the current fiscal year it is supposed to come to about 22 percent, which shows attention to the need for reducing reliance on the banking system which the program has emphasized.

#### The Classical Theory of Modifying the Exchange Rate

"Second. The second effect of the program is that we have extricated ourselves from the exchange rate complex and the principle of refusing to touch the rate. A prominent aspect in money policies up to 1978 was to refuse to modify the exchange rate and to resort to subterfuge to remedy the situation by imposing extra taxes on revenues.

I believe that it was necessary, for the sake of healthy economic activity, to adopt this corrective measure and to rid oneself of this complex.

"I agree with some economists who point out that the classical theory of modifying the exchange rate might not be of benefit to a developing country which produces agricultural commodities that do not possess adequate elasticity and do not affect the consumption of inelastic imported goods.

"This statement is correct, but in my opinion one should review exchange policy by viewing it as an instrument for increasing production — in other words, even though we do not have influence over international prices, local currency revenues from production should rise as a result of a modification in the exchange rate which would consequently provide an incentive to increase production.

"For example, the price of a unity of \$100: when the price of a dollar is 50 piasters, the revenues will be 50 pounds, but if the exchange rate is modified to 90 piasters the value of \$100 will be 90 pounds. Consequently, if the producer feels an improvement in his income, that will be an incentive to increase production.

"As regards imports, there is no doubt that there is room to guide consumption, especially if correct fiscal and monetary policies are pursued which will reduce the volume of cash available within the domestic economy. In addition, there are positive effects on the selection of different types of profitable investments for the domestic economy.

"Third, the assumption that some people make, that the program is concentrated on the exchange rate policy alone, is not correct. Rather, as I mentioned above, the exchange rate resembled an instrument for increasing production, but the focus of the program concentrated on structural reforms to increase production.

"For example, reconstruction programs were started in agricultural and industrial projects because we cannot complain of a deterioration in production, continue to expand production and increase the complexity of the problem without devoting attention to the real reasons why production in the al-Jazirah project, the Blue or White Nile projects, or the sugar projects has declined. Therefore it is one of the virtues of the program that concentration was placed on this aspect and that programs were initiated to redevelop these projects so that it would be possible for us to benefit from the resources available for increasing production."

We Cannot Say That We Have Carried out the Program Set forth

His excellency went on to say:

"I would like to state that we cannot say that we have carried out the program that set forth unless we complete the structural reforms that are underway and complete the projects we have started, and that will take time. We cannot say that we can complete these reforms in a single year; rather, the results of the program will appear when the structural reforms which I was talking about are completed and we start actual production, and consequently they will help improve current accounts, by functioning as a means of self-reliance.

"In addition we cannot evaluate the program and its positive effects before we have completed the reform. That in my opinion is real development.

"Fourth, the program has also helped get rid of the complex of subsidies as a means for offering each commodity at its true price and consequently giving citizens the freedom to choose and organize their consumption in accordance with their income, while reducing the expenditure column in the general budget.

"In brief, these are some of the positive elements the program has achieved, that is, setting the approaches in their proper course and boldly addressing the economic problems.

"I am not saying that the goals have been fully realized. The program has met with many modifications in the course of the past 3 years, and there is much that we have to do in order to extricate ourselves from the emergency problem facing our economy, which is an easy problem in comparison with those facing many countries.

"Let us not forget, either, that during the period of the program we faced many foreign problems such as the rise in oil and sugar prices in the second year of the program and the continued increase in the inflation rates in our main markets."

## The General Organizations

Question: Your excellency, in regard to structural reforms, you have not addressed yourself to the issue of the general organizations and the contribution they must make to the program.

The minister replied,

"One of the first studies made in 1978 was a joint study with the World Bank on the state of the general organizations in the agricultural processing, service or trade sectors and the reform of these organizations.

"The study produced specific approaches which the Council of Ministers discussed, presenting specific recommendations on reform. I will focus my discussion on the trade sector.

"The General Commercial Sector Organization and its branch organizations were eliminated. They have been eliminated, and we have established four commercial firms so far which have been registered under the Law on Companies and operate like any company in the private sector. They are the al-Jazirah Company for Trade and Services, the Kordofan Company for Engineering and Trade, the Kuwaitrid Company and the Kartoum Company for Trade and Shipping.

"Although the experiment is no more than 2 years old, there has been a radical change in performance. The companies have been given full freedom to function under the management of an independent board of directors without unnecessary intervention from the competent minister, so that there will ultimately be accountability. In my opinion, the experiment with the companies has been a success not only in realizing profits or payment of taxes; it has also helped to stabilize prices, provide goods, and resist shortages; indeed, it was a basic factor in getting us out of the supply crisis.

"For example, the method the al-Jazirah Company followed in distributing commodities to more than 600 shops in the tripartite capital has proved its success.

"The commercial section of Kuwaitrid, Kordofan and Khartoum helped provide numerous basic commodities.

"I stated from the outset that these companies' survival will depend on their actual contribution to social profitability and private profitability, and any company that does not realize these goals will be eliminated.

"We are closely watching these companies' performance in spite of the great discrepancies that have accompanied the experiment. This is a new experiment which has brought broad scope to the concept of commercial activity in the public sector, breaking down all the restrictions which went with the commercial organization experiment."

## The Figures Our Exports Have Recorded Are Far Short of Our Aspirations

Question: Revenues from our exports have recorded a rise in the past 3 years, including this one. We would like to become informed about foreign trade's role in the program and the successes that have been realized in this regard.

The minister replied,

"As I mentioned previously, foreign trade is the focal point of the stipulated growth. Exports are the real source of foreign revenues and are the real source of self-reliance, since foreign aid is nothing but a contribution, not a permanent source; with contributions from foreign trade and our export capability, we can acquire various investment, production or consumption commodities.

"With respect to exports, we have adopted many policies which will help increase production. Among these, we have declared a clear policy which will allow any capable, responsible source to export any available surplus without resorting to unnecessary periodic changes which will exacerbate the lack of continuity in the flow of our products or our foreign reputation.

"Then we eliminated the monopolies and opened the door to free competition. Our policy has also been concerned with the producer, by announcing lower prices that are feasible for main crops in order to protect the farmer and guarantee him a reasonable income which will give him an incentive to increase his production, since pricing policy is the means to attain abundance notwithstanding the consequent rise in prices to the consumer.

"There have also been constant contacts abroad in the bilateral or group contexts to increase exports. However, let us not forget that increasing exports will require that increased surpluses be available to the foreign market. Also, there are vicious foreign factors which we must cope with now, such as a deterioration in the prices of agricultural commodities in foreign markets and stagnant demand in our main markets.

"Although there has been a modest rise in revenues from imports from \$551 million in 1977-78 to \$581 million in 1979-80, and the preliminary estimates for the calendar year 1980 are about \$641 million, these figures are far short of our ambitions, and we hope that the rate of growth of exports will rise once production in the projects under reconstruction increases.

"The fruits have begun to appear, this season, especially in cotton, corn and oil grains.

"If the increases continue as expected, there is no doubt that export revenues will rise in future years."

#### No Changes in General Export Policy

His excellency went on,

"As regards imports, we have followed a flexible policy, in which our goal is to increase the supply of commodities in the market, meet demand and eliminate bottlenecks, especially in main commodities.

"We have turned to the classification of goods and definition of means of financing, through the revenues available to banks or what is known as internal revenues. There are some restrictions, to protect local production, but in general the policy is aimed at liberating imports from bureaucratic restrictions that caused shortages in the past.

"Consequently, there will be no change in general import policy at the present time; I believe that the current policy is clear, and we consequently hope that the people concerned will commit themselves to the letter of this policy without entering into commitments which the government might not agree to or having to pay money for goods which the ministry might not allow in.

"The deputy minister has issued many press advertisements stating what is permitted and what is prohibited. Consequently, we expect importers to commit themselves to this policy, and I can assert that nothing makes it mandatory that ministry deal with problems which deviate from the general policy.

"I would also like to stress that national imports policy is binding and that the permits issued by the nationwide ministry are documents whose execution is mandatory.

"I believe that if we compare the supply situation in the summer of 1979 with the supply situation now, we will find that the difference is great in terms of the disappearance of shortages, the availability of goods and alleviation of the masses' suffering.

"We have eliminated the shortages in construction materials, rice, lentils, vegetable oil, detergent, batteries, sugar and bread-discs. I would not say that we have reached a stage of abundance in its exact sense, but I can say that the policies that have been followed, and the work that each agency in the economic sector has performed, have helped eliminate the supply shortages, provide basic goods and alleviate the sufferings of the masses."

Question: Some people say that the market is full of luxury goods, like canned foods for instance, and that this might be wasteful of resources. I held a local press interview in which it was pointed out that we have imported a billion pounds' worth of canned goods. I was amazed at this news, since I had not imagined that our resources would permit the spending of 1 billion pounds on such goods as canned food.

The minister said,

"Of course there is a difference in opinion on whether all canned goods should be considered luxuries or necessities. Regardless of that difference, the value of all canned goods that have been imported of all various kinds does not exceed \$3 million, and that is less than 1 percent of the value of the letters of credit that are opened.

"We might mention that the buying power for that kind of commodity is limited and therefore there is no fear of an influx of it.

"In spite of the numerous equations, we previously issued a decree stopping the imports of canned goods which were basically financed through the free market, that is, through moneychangers and not government resources; we stopped that because we felt that the volumes imported were very large in comparison with local demand, and we stopped that for a period in which the matter was to be studied in greater depth. This suspension did not have an effect on the course of events or the free market exchange rate of the dollar. The rate of the dollar did not drop as a result of the suspension of canned goods, and consequently the effect of that on the volume of imports or the resources available for financing was modest.



"Rather, we believe that there were nothing but restrictions. Whenever smuggling across our immense borders increased, customs revenues dropped and the argument on inflation intensified.

"We are not following a free policy in the classical sense, but we are trying to reduce restrictions, intervene on behalf of the public interest, review the lists of goods from time to time after evaluation and study and produce alternatives, which will be declared to everyone concerned."

The minister went on to say,

"As I said, this policy has not failed. Rather, it has succeeded, in view of the stability the market now enjoys. If we want to reduce the volume of overall demand for goods, that will be done not by setting out restrictions but rather through financial and monetary policies."

#### We Are Not Protecting Idols — We Are Protecting Output

The discussion with Mr Faruq Ibrahim al-Maqbul, the minister of cooperation, trade and supply, moved over to the issue of local industrial production. We next asked this question of his excellency: Do commercial policies take protection of local industry into account?

His excellency replied by saying,

"Yes, of course we protect the investments that have been made, on the condition that local production be sufficient for market requirements and that product quality and prices be reasonable. Consultations with the Ministry of Industry on this matter are continuous, but one of the conditions that have prompted us to protect industry is that it be productive, and we cannot protect an industry whose production is confined to sporadic periods which are not sufficient for the needs of the market and those that lack sound management or a good financial situation.

We do not protect categories, we protect production. If local industry helps us with abundant, consistent production and reasonable prices for the consumer, it certainly will receive every possible form of support from us; consequently, what we ask of local industry is that it bear the responsibility for supplying goods and bear the responsibility for sound distribution and for trying to create surpluses for export, because that is the only way to reduce costs and open numerous areas of production.

"There are a number of methods for protecting local production, including prohibiting imports and using financial techniques by raising the customs classes on future imported goods.

"In the Sudan, up to now we have followed the method of prohibiting imports of fledgling industries, but there are only a limited number of years in a childhood, and a youthful industry cannot remain so for decades.

"I can assert that we encourage and protect investments and know what tentative difficulties they face at certain times; however, we will not stand for scarcity, want or unjustified high prices."

## The Issue of High Prices

Question: Some citizens complain of the high prices of certain commodities even when those are available. What is your excellency's comment on that?"

His excellency replied,

"A number of factors determine the price of a given commodity. In the case of imported goods, their price depends on the import price CIF, and in the case of local goods their price depends on production cost.

The prices for various goods fluctuate within the limits of this factor, in addition to the factor of supply — that is, the more the supply of a commodity increases the more the sales price drops, because the seller contents himself with a lower profit class.

"I believe that the anticipated increase in local output and the continued flow of imported goods will help stabilize prices; I do not believe that the prices of many goods in the Sudan are unreasonably high in comparison with prices in other countries.

"Although we do not subsidize commodities as a declared policy, the prices of many commodities are below those that exist in similar countries.

"Perhaps that has been because of an improvement in the supply situation and the availability of goods in reasonable quantities. However, the important point is price stability and a low rate of annual increase. That is the criterion we must think about."

## Does the Current Distribution Policy Mean a Monopoly?

Question: Does the current distribution policy as regard major commodities mean a sort of monopoly, especially via public sector and cooperative sector company channels?

The minister replied,

"First, we must state that the commodities emphasized are confined to two — sugar and flour. That is, the government has been supervising these commodities directly up to now. Consequently, direct distribution by the government is restricted to these commodities. I would like to say that we should point out that the ministry's responsibility for distribution is restricted to the Province of Khartoum and that the regional governments are responsible for distribution within their own areas in accordance with the decentralization policy.

"Third [sic] as regards the Province of Khartoum, sugar is distributed in accordance with declared policy through a number of channels including the Federation of Wholesale Merchants, and the Federation of Retail Merchants, in addition to the cooperative sector and a public sector company, the al-Jazirah Company, because of the distribution channels it has, embodied in permanent retail merchant customers.

"As regards the other commodities, the ministry does not involve itself in distribution. Rather, they are given freedom to move in the market and the public sector companies and cooperative organizations are in free competition with the private sector in regard to lentils, rice, cooking oil, coffee, tea or other basic commodities. The

importation of all these commodities is permitted in the case of all sectors; whoever has the ability to supply them can distribute them."

#### The New Law and the Cooperative Bank Have Put Cooperative Activity on Its Proper Course

The conversation with the minister of cooperation, trade and supply then moved over to the cooperative movement, and we posed the following question to him:

What policy has been set forth to make use of the cooperative sector and strengthen it so that it can play its role in the present and future effectively? The minister replied by saying,

"I would like to state that the government takes special interest in improving and developing the cooperative sector, and, although cooperative activity basically depends on the effort of the people at the level of societies, regional federations or the peak of the system, which is represented by the National Cooperative Federation, the government's role is embodied in care, guidance, supervision and the provision of policies which will help advance the cooperative movement.

"We have spelled out a general cooperative policy whereby it will be rid of limited activities represented by distribution, its structures will be built by exploring the areas of agricultural, industrial and service production, and it will work to carry out the general framework the government's economic program has spelled out in the form of increasing production and improving services.

"I am happy to state that there has been a perceptible change in the last 2 years through the cooperative movement's exploration of new areas and horizons.

"There are the cooperative projects that are functioning and there are the new projects under construction. With thanks to God, we have completed the constitutional measures related to the Cooperative Law for 1982, which went into effect following its signing by the president.

"One of the most important features of that law is the emphasis on the decentralization of cooperatives, so that the cooperative movement can develop in the regional context, and the granting of all the central minister's powers to the competent regional minister as far as cooperative activity goes by legal stipulations and not by delegation.

"We hope that this method will help induce the people's movement in the provinces to bear its responsibilities in full.

"The central ministry will be in charge of responsibility for general policies and for supervision of the national organizations, in addition to the cooperative movement in the Province of Khartoum.

"In addition to that, the People's Assembly, at its last session, gave agreement to the Law on the Cooperative Development Bank, and we hope that that draft will see the light of day this year, since we have created a specialized financing institution to carry out the policy that has been set forth, which is to get the cooperative movement to explore areas of production. I believe that this is a great achievement, since it

is not reasonable for us to demand that the cooperative movement get into productive investments if it is suffering from a scarcity of revenues. Consequently, it has been necessary to support this policy by establishing a specialized bank which will help not just in financing but also in studying and evaluating cooperative movement projects.

"I believe that we have set the cooperative movement on its proper course, and there is enthusiasm on the part of people in various levels cooperatives for participating effectively in the total development the government policy has laid out, especially since the importance of commodity distribution has started to disappear with the disappearance of sudden shortages and has ceased to be an activity that has a future."

The minister's discussion on the basic aspects in which the program has succeeded addressed itself to classical theory, the theory of the exchange rate, which means that revising the set foreign currency rate will help increase exports by helping to increase demand for them as a result in the drop in their prices relative to the prices offered by other countries.

"Imports will drop, since their prices in the local market will rise and consequently consumers will proceed to buy alternative local goods, and this will help increase production and increase exports, and the reduction of imports will help improve the balance of payments.

"However, in applying this theory, there must be price flexibility in goods, in the sense that demand should be flexible, rising and falling with the rise and fall in prices."

The minister went on to state:

"With respect to agricultural countries, in the Sudan, our export commodities, agricultural commodities, might enjoy a high degree of flexibility with respect to prices, in the sense that the world market sets the prices for us and consequently their decline will not mean high rate of increases in exports, especially when we take into consideration that we enjoy a monopoly in the world market only in the case of ginseng."

"As a consequence, we review the issue of the modification of the exchange rate in the context of the Sudan as a means for increasing the producer's revenues in Sudanese currency. For example, if the price of a dollar is 50 piasters, and the price of a unit is \$1.80, the revenues will be 90 pounds, and if the price of the dollar is lowered to 90 piasters, revenues will rise to 90 pounds.

"The rise in producer's revenues will be an incentive to increase production in future seasons.

"As regards imports, there may be commodities for which demand is inflexible and consequently consumption of these might not be significantly affected when their prices rise. There are also inflexible productive instruments, so that the consumer turns to purchase local alternatives. However, there is without a doubt an important aspect, and that is that the price rise makes citizens take individual initiatives to guide their consumption in the medium range.

"It is certain that consumption patterns evolve according to prices and incomes. However, that might take some time, and it might require a fiscal and monetary policy influencing total demand in the domestic economy.

"In addition to that, the rise in the costs of investment goods will undoubtedly help guide the selection of investment fields and emphasis on projects that are profitable socially as well as personally and effect a conversion to production connected to local resources and a failure to rely on production depending on imported factors."

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