

Khartoum

Given their general lack of interest in the area, the British decided to abandon the Sudan in December 1883. While their forces still held several northern towns and Red Sea ports, they ordered Gordon to return to Khartoum and organize a withdrawal of the Egyptian garrisons there.

Gordon reached Khartoum in February 1884. At first he was greeted with jubilation, as many of the tribes in the immediate area were at odds with the Mahdists. Transportation northward was still open, and the telegraph lines intact. However the uprising of the Beja soon after his arrival changed things considerably, reducing communications to runners.

He considered the routes northward to be too dangerous to extricate the garrisons, and so pressed for reinforcements to be sent from Cairo to help with the withdrawal. He also suggested that his old enemy Zubayr, a fine military commander, be given tacit control of the Sudan in order to provide a counter to the Ansar. London rejected both proposals, and so Gordon prepared for a fight.

In March 1884 Gordon tried a small offensive to clear the road northward to Egypt, but a number of the officers in the Egyptian force went over to the enemy and their forces fled the field after firing a single salvo. This convinced him that he could carry out only defensive operations, and he returned to Khartoum to construct defensive works. By April 1884 Gordon had managed to evacuate some 2,500 of the foreign population that were able to make the trek northwards. His mobile force under Colonel Stewart then returned to the city as well, after repeated incidents where the 200 or so Egyptian forces under his command would turn and run at the slightest provocation.

That month the Ansar had reached Khartoum, and Gordon was completely cut off. Nevertheless his defensive works, consisting mainly of mines, proved so frightening to the Ansar that they were unable to penetrate into the city. Stewart maintained a number of small skirmishes using gunboats on the Nile once the waters rose, and in August managed to recapture Berber for a short time. However Stewart was killed soon after in another foray from Berber to Dongola, a fact Gordon only learned about in a letter from the Mahdi himself.

Under increasing pressure from the public to support him, the British eventually ordered Lord Garnet Joseph Wolseley to relieve Gordon. He was already deployed in Egypt due to the attempted coup there earlier, and was able to form up a large force of infantry, moving forward at an extremely slow rate. Realizing they would take some time to arrive, Gordon pressed for him to send forward a "flying column" of camel-borne troops under the command of Brigadier-General Sir Herbert Stuart. This force was attacked by the Mahdists at Abu Klea (Abu Tulayh?) and wiped out.

At Metemma, 100 miles north of Khartoum, Wolseley's advance guard met four of Gordon's steamers, sent down to provide speedy transport for the first relieving troops. They gave Wolseley a dispatch from Gordon claiming that the city was about to fall.

However, only moments later a runner brought in a message claiming the city could hold out for a year. Deciding to believe the later, the force stopped while they refit the steamers to hold more troops.

They finally arrived in Khartoum on January 28, 1885, to find the town had fallen two days earlier. The Ansar had waited for the Nile spring flood to recede before attacking the poorly defended river approach, overcoming the garrison. Gordon was killed on the steps of the palace and beheaded, although the Mahdi had expressly ordered for him to be taken alive. Wolesely's force retreated after attempting to force their way to the center of the town on ships, being met with a hail of fire.

Kassala and Sannar fell soon after, and by the end of 1885 the Ansar had begun to move into the southern regions of Sudan. In all Sudan, only Suakin, reinforced by Indian Army troops, and Wadi Halfa on the northern frontier remained in Anglo-Egyptian hands.

Full text of article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_ibn_Abdalla