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EDITORIALS

Failure at the Assembly	1489
U P Congress Split	1490
Maintenance Imports	1491

WEEKLY NOTES

Metric Weights from the 1st —Gap in Machine Tools— A Priority List at Long Last — Lenders' Share in Profits — Routes to Goa Opened and Closed	1492
--	------

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cut Down the U-Sector— Methodology of Surveys: A Comment	1494
--	------

OUR DELHI LETTER

Asia's Answer to Economic Groupings	1495
--	------

LETTER FROM SOUTH

Rift in Andhra Congress: Top Leadership Must Act	1497
---	------

SPECIAL ARTICLES

Legislation Forestalled —From Our Delhi Corres- pondent	1498
---	------

Studying the U-Sector —Ashish Bose	1500
---------------------------------------	------

Balanced Regional Growth —P K Chaudhuri	1501
--	------

FROM THE CHAIR

Industrial Finance Corp'n	1505
The Tata Iron and Steel Co Ltd	1509

COMPANY NOTES

Greaves Cotton — Kesoram Cotton—Mandya Paper— Pesticides	1507
--	------

AROUND BOMBAY MARKETS

Sentiment Still Unsettled, But . . .	1511
---	------

CURRENT STATISTICS

Banking Returns—Wholesale Price Index — Foreign Trade — Jute — Wagon Loading	1514
---	------

Failure at the Assembly

ONE is entitled to be more than slightly worried by the thought that East-West tensions are apparently so extreme at the moment that the top leaders of the two camps are no longer even on speaking terms and, what is worse, not even the joint efforts of all the heads of the other States can get them to meet. In this particular sense the current session of the United Nations General Assembly has, so far, been an extraordinary experience : the session could have had on its agenda matters of the closest concern to all mankind; it has had the participation of more heads of state than any other session before: and yet it has achieved hardly anything at all.

Seldom, indeed, have so many achieved so little with so much effort. What could have been an opportunity for advancing the cause of peace, and relaxing of tensions, became a curious mixture of fruitless pleas on the part of the neutral nations and intensive propagandist tirades on the part of the two giants (especially the Russians). The original purpose with which the heads of States had rushed to New York was totally lost; and it is only with some effort that our is able to recall today that serious, down-to-earth, negotiations on disarmament formed the original objective of this "summit" at the U N. At any rate, that was the avowed objective of Mr Khrushchev's participation; and the irony of it all is that it is he himself who made the least effort to preserve or promote the climate for such a discussion. His tirades against the West made all calm discussion impossible; and, indeed, even from his own narrow-propaganda viewpoint he may be said to have overplayed his hand.

This became clear in the debate on Mr Hammarskjöld's role in the Congo. Although the Russian demand for an immediate end to all forms of colonialism won many a clap from the Africans, the Soviet leader soon found himself far ahead of any point beyond which the Africans themselves wanted to go in this direction. If, as seems likely, the principal aim of Mr Khrushchev's visit to the U N was that of impressing the new members from Africa with his sincerity and progressiveness, the object was at least partly defeated by an excess of zeal.

The last week at the Assembly reduced itself to feverish attempts by the neutrals to get the two giants together, and their more or less cold reception of the idea. The resolution moved by the five-power Afro-Asian bloc was well-intended: and there is obvious good sense in the contention that in order to stem any further deterioration of East-West tensions, it was urgent that Mr Eisenhower and Mr Khrushchev agreed at least to a friendly meeting. It is, of course, doubtful in the extreme if such a meeting could have achieved anything specific; but it is reasonable to assume that it might have improved the climate for negotiations later.

But the drawback of the neutralist move was to overlook the fact —or at any rate not to attach it the importance it deserved — that on the very eve of the American elections the desirability of a two-power Summit was bound to be questionable from Mr Eisenhower's point of view, and of rather limited use from the standpoint, of Mr Khrushchev. In the circumstances neither could work up much enthusiasm for the