

BRITISH BASE ON GAN NOW READY FOR SERVICE

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WEDNESDAY

UNRECOGNIZED "PRESIDENT" FLIES THE REBEL FLAG

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From Our Special Correspondent

GAN, DEC. 8

The island of Gan, which will be in full and continuous use early next year as Britain's main military stepping-stone in the Indian Ocean, has in theory come under a new flag. It is the flag, just made, of the "United Suvadive Islands," whose "President," Mr. A. Afif Didi, flew it proudly in the boats which to-day took representatives of the Press to see him on the island nearest to Gan.

The flag is of blue, green, and red horizontal stripes with a crescent moon in the centre and a star in each band. These stars are meant to represent the three island groups which last January broke away from the central Government of the Maldivian Archipelago, south-west of Ceylon, of which they are all a part. Only one of the three groups is still independent.

In the second half of this year the Huvadū Atoll and the isle of Fau Mulaku were beaten or cowed into surrender by the central Maldivian Government. About eight persons were

10-OARED BOATS

After vain meetings in Ceylon, Britain tried to get the present Prime Minister, Mr. Ibrahim Nasir, to go to London, but he deflected the request. The latest news of him is that he and two of his colleagues of Ministerial rank are in Ceylon—and there is no island in the world to-day so wrapped in obscurities as Ceylon.

So, while the construction labour from Pakistan on Gan is being paid off because the job is done, and while British service crews arrive in greater

number to prepare for the traffic when Gan replaces Katunayake, in Ceylon, within two months, "President" Afif declares his grievances against the central Government of taxation without representation or return and asks the world to recognize him.

To-day we flew from Katunayake to Gan and found Mr. Afif on Fedu island, in an open school shelter decorated with Naafi Christmas streamers. To reach Fedu from Gan we went in 10-oared boats with the singing oarsmen rising to their feet as they bent to their oars. The dark islanders, who are Muslim, waited in their best clothes on the beach and then stood at a respectful distance while Mr. Afif, a thin youthful-looking man in a white jacket with gold buttons, sarong, and sandals, sat and answered questions in polite English.

TAXES BUT NO BUDGET

There were, he said, 6,500 people in Addu Atoll and they had a People's Council of 52, which met about monthly, and an executive council. There was no budget yet but taxes were collected. Nearly 500 were employed by the Royal Air Force and were paid in sterling. The only currency of the Atoll now was sterling, the Maldivian rupee being no longer used.

The islanders fished, grew copra, and some rice, and had small home-like industries. They would like to trade with Ceylon as they had done before, but at present they could not. Some men would continue to be employed by the R.A.F. after construction was finished.

The R.A.F. confirmed this last fact, for Maldivians do domestic work at the camp. But they have to come from neighbouring islands and it may mean a two-hour row morning and evening. They get between 4s. 10d. and 6s. 10d. a day and, in addition, some rice and food, being apt to spend their money on new Naafi wonders rather than on family needs.

400 R.A.F. MEN

Since the short stay of a Company of The Cheshire Regiment from Singapore in August, the Gan post has relied on the R.A.F. Regiment for its ground defence. About 65 men of the R.A.F. Regiment are there now and the total R.A.F. strength is about 400. The men come for one year and the present Commanding Officer, Wing-Commander I. Thomas, has a happy ship. On Christmas Day each mess will put 10 men in one of the island's boats for an all-in race.

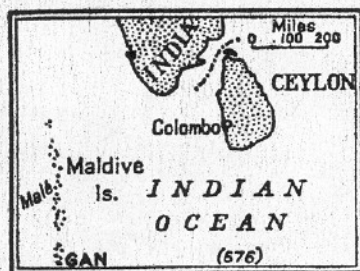
Having cost nearly £4,500,000 to date, it is as well the post is soundly organized. But what money apparently cannot bring is a lasting political foundation. This is what is lacking for all the work in those green coral waters.

ISLAND "FOR NOTHING" ON THREE CONDITIONS

COLOMBO, Dec. 8.—Mr. Hilmy Didi, the Maldivian Government representative in Colombo, said last night that Britain could have Gan island for nothing if she agreed to certain conditions.

These conditions were that the British Government "must permit us to enter Addu Atoll... and let us put down the rebellion led by Afif Didi, as is our right"; Britain must agree to rates of compensation and make payment to the displaced islanders before further construction on the air base was carried out; and Britain must give up plans to build a causeway connecting the air base on Gan with the radio station on Hittadu "because it would disrupt the islanders' traditional way of life."

Mr. Hilmy Didi said Britain was now willing to pay £2,000 a year for the next 100 years for Gan and Hittadu. The present Maldivian régime objected to the previous Government's agreement to the 100-year period and wanted it limited to 15 years. The offer of Gan "for nothing" would be for the next 15 years, with an option of renewal.—*Reuter.*



killed and four injured, some were flogged, and nearly 500 were deported, perhaps to be left alone on any of the 1,800 Maldivian islands which are uninhabited. This is the Maldivian system of punishment and one that Mr. Afif says he suffered after the last war; for seven years, he declared to-day, food was brought to him in a boat and he saw no one else.

CORAL AND CEMENT

Addu Atoll, the southernmost group to which Gan belongs, remains beyond the central Government's reach. The reason is that on Gan, only one mile and a half long and three-quarters of a mile wide, Britain has constructed a static aircraft carrier of coral and cement. The island has been swept bare of some 11,000 palm trees and all but three of its Maldivian huts. Its inhabitants have been rehoused on the adjacent island of Fedu. A giant runway, with prefabricated buildings of every kind, stretches out in the sun. Physically, the staging post is emphatically there; politically, it hangs by a weird and tenuous thread.

Britain did not want it this way and she has not recognized Mr. Afif. All this year she has been struggling to lift the negotiations with the Central Government out of the quicksands of mistrust, personal animosity, and puzzling Maldivian ill-will. She has failed. Always the Maldivians have seemed to change their reading of the 1953 agreement, which is the present basis of the archipelago's relationship with Britain as a protectorate and their reading of a tentative agreement three years ago allowing Britain to make the airfield, as well as a radio station on Hittadu Island, in Addu Atoll.