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DESTROYER SENT TO MALDIVES

Five Britons evacuated as dispute flares

BY A COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT

A TENSE situation exists at Malé, capital of the Maldivian Islands, in the Indian Ocean, owing to a flare-up in the three-year-old dispute between the British and Maldivian Governments. The dispute arose out of the lease to Britain of Gan Island, an atoll in the group, 300 miles from Malé, where a £5 million R.A.F. staging base was completed three years ago.

The destroyer *Cassandra*, 2,020 tons, has been anchored in the lagoon off Malé for the past fortnight "for the protection of British lives and property."

The only Britons remaining are Mr. Humphrey Artingdon-Davy, the British Representative, and

be responsible for their safety. Sir Arthur sent out a radio call for help, and the frigate *Fada*, 1,575 tons, was sent.

When it became clear that the crisis would be long drawn out the *Fada* was replaced by the *Cassandra* and eventually the evacuation of Britons was decided.

Garrison cheerful

Meanwhile in Gan Island the R.A.F. garrison are carrying on cheerfully, isolated from the dispute by the intervening distance.

The only aircraft stationed there are two Shackletons for air-sea rescue, but there is a busy staging traffic, with nearly 700 landings and take-offs over the past 12 months.

Relations with the local islanders are excellent, in fact too much so for the central Government. This is the cause of the dispute and dates from the time when the lease was being negotiated and the 8,700-foot runway was being built.

The Maldivian Government, trying to embarrass Britain, ordered the Gan Islanders to stop working for the R.A.F. on the runways and on other jobs. But the islanders, who had "never had it so good," refused to obey this order.

The Malé Government then cut off supplies for the inhabitants on Gan and the surrounding islands. The R.A.F. took over the job of feeding them, which they did much better.

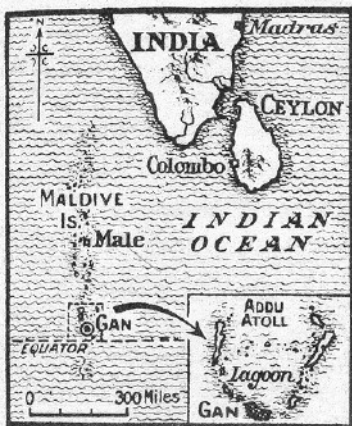
Break-away "republic"

Eventually the islanders broke away from the central Government and established what they called the United Suvadive Republic. The central Government retaliated by sending a ship with 200 troops on a punitive expedition. Some of the rebellious islanders were killed.

Britain refused to recognise the new republic and offered its good offices to bring about a reconciliation. On this basis the lease was signed.

Britain paid £100,000 down, undertook to pay in addition £150,000 a year for five years, which has been duly paid over, and agreed to provide technical aid.

The attempted reconciliation has come to nothing because the Maldivian Government will not provide a safe-conduct for a delegation from the break-away islands in sufficiently clear terms.



Mr. Saunders, a naval architect employed by the Maldivian Government.

The five other Britons in the area have now been evacuated to Colombo. They are Mrs. Saunders, two women school teachers sent out under the British aid programme, and two engineers.

Self-governing

Mr. Artingdon-Davy and Mr. Saunders have their homes and offices on Dunedu Island, just opposite Malé, but spend most of their time in the *Cassandra*. The Maldives are a self-governing British Protectorate.

The serious turn in the chronically strained relations began at the end of November, when Sir Arthur Snelling, Deputy Under-Secretary, Commonwealth Relations Office, visited Malé for talks with Mr. Nasir, Maldivian Prime Minister.

A few days after his arrival islanders staged a hostile demonstration against the handful of Britons on Dunedu.

Mr. Nasir warned Sir Arthur that he and the other Britons had better leave, as he could no longer