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## Maldivé disagreements reach a head

By PATRICK KEATLEY, our Commonwealth Correspondent

The long-simmering disagreement between Britain and the Government of the Maldivé Islands has come to a head with an ultimatum from the Maldivian Prime Minister and action by local demonstrators against the members of the British mission stationed near the capital town of Malé.

Official British sources in London and Ceylon had no statement to make last night, but reports from the Sultanate said that angry mobs had stormed and wrecked the little local airstrip which serves the British staff on the island where their mission is located. Food supplies for the British envoy, Mr Humphrey Arthington-Davy, and his colleagues were now being maintained by air-drop.

An urgent confidential report from Mr Arthington-Davy is now on its way to Britain through diplomatic channels. When it arrives at the Commonwealth Relations Office it will be dealt with personally by Mr Duncan Sandys. The Secretary of State visited the Maldivés last summer, en route to his negotiations on the Malaysian Federation, and it is the terms of the agreement he concluded with the Maldivian Government at that time which are now the subject of an angry dispute between London and Malé.

At stake in this quarrel is the RAF staging post at Gan island in the southernmost atoll of the Maldivian group, built at a cost of some £5 millions and capable of taking the largest jet aircraft. It is a vital link in the chain that stretches from Lyneham in Wiltshire to Singapore and Woomera, via Cyprus and Aden.

Until Mr Sandys's visit last summer, the Maldivian Government was openly proclaiming its dissatisfaction about Gan, and seeking—with some success—to enlist sympathy from Arab countries and other States of the Afro-Asian block at the United Nations. But the Anglo-Maldivian accord of September, 1963, was supposed to have brought about the end of this quarrel, with two tangible benefits to this country.

Not only was the presence of RAF on Gan to be regularised by formal treaty but the British Government was also to be granted facilities for the building of a powerful transmitter which would beam out the overseas service of the BBC in a multitude of languages to South-east Asia.

The Maldivés are an archipelago of some two thousand coral islands in the Indian Ocean, 400 miles west and south of Ceylon. Fishing, lace-making, and coconut farming are the main occupations and the 90,000 inhabitants are subjects of the Sultan, his Highness Mohamed Farid Didi.