

GAN REPAIRS THE LIFE-LINE

The activities of two men, Mr. Bandaranaike and Col. Nasser, threatened to cut Britain off from Australia by air. Now the ability to use an island in the Indian Ocean allows us to mend this breach in our Commonwealth communications.

DAILY TELEGRAPH

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THE news that Britain is to reactivate the airfield at Gan, one of the Maldivé Islands, is a reminder that one of the most serious casualties in the Suez imbroglio has been our Commonwealth communications with the Far East and Australia.

Our fleet base at Malta is now cut off from the Indian Ocean and beyond. For just how long the White Ensign will be diverted to the Cape route and Simonstown is anybody's guess.

Our air communications, moreover, depended largely on the rights we previously enjoyed—but have now lost—to over-fly Egyptian and Syrian territory. So both of the old and well-established air routes, via Egypt and Khartoum and via Cyprus, Basra and Bahrain, are interrupted.

Now, apart from the possibilities of a difficult diversion over Eastern Turkey and Persia, there remains only the less well-developed air route that by-passes the Middle East via West, Central and East Africa. This route we can still use, thanks to the transit rights that we enjoy over French, Libyan and Belgian territory.

Outwards from the United Kingdom to the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean the stages that suggest themselves are Idris (formerly Castel Benito) outside Tripoli, Kano in Nigeria, Entebbe in Uganda. From the Seychelles the next stage is, or should be, Ceylon, whence the route goes on via Malaya and Singapore to Darwin or Hongkong.

Unkindest Cut

SO far, so good—were it not for the unkindest cut of all that will now deprive our naval and air forces of all the facilities in Ceylon they have hitherto enjoyed. Trincomalee is our only naval base in mid-Indian Ocean. Though not a dockyard, it is a magnificent natural harbour, and a fuelling base with the largest naval oil reserves outside the United Kingdom.

Here, too, the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station, flies his Flag. The present incumbent is the 100th since the appointment was created in 1744. His parish is the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

Negombo—or Katunayake as the Ceylonese nationalists prefer to call it—is the fine airfield 18 miles outside Colombo. The British built it during and after the war, and the R.A.F. have exercised admirable control over it. At both Trincomalee and Katunayake, too, there are wireless relay stations, without which Whitehall and Canberra might be out of touch for as much as eight hours daily.

Till April, 1956, when Mr. Ban-



daranaiké's People's United Front won the General Election in Ceylon, all had been well with these British bases. But he was pledged to exercise his rights under the Defence Agreement of 1947 to take the bases over from us.

At the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference last July, the British Government succeeded, so they believed, in reach-

By Lt.-Gen. H. G. MARTIN

ing a satisfactory agreement whereby they would retain "certain facilities" which would meet their needs. But when Anglo-French forces attacked Egypt on Oct. 31, Mr. Bandaranaike at once sought and obtained from the British Government a guarantee that the bases would not be used for any purpose, such as fuelling, even remotely connected with the current operations.

He has since pointed out that, as he would assuredly impose a similar ban in a future crisis, the bases would be quite useless to us in any conceivable war.

Early in December, on his way back from the United Nations in New York and from calling on Mr. Eisenhower—an occasion he had found all the more gratifying in that Mr. Eisenhower had just refused to receive Mr. Selwyn Lloyd—Mr. Bandaranaike returned to London with his anti-colonialist sentiments properly fortified.

He was peremptory in his demand for an early hand-over of the bases, to be followed soon after by a complete cessation of all facilities even in peace-time.

Filling the Gap

BY early December, then, the Ceylonese bases were as good as gone. In a matter of months the Government might find themselves out of touch with Australia and the Far East by air, and in only intermittent touch with them by wireless. True, they still had air transit rights across India, but only for strictly limited numbers of Servicemen and at the pleasure of that other neutralist, Mr. Nehru.

Clearly, they needed something firmer to fill the gap. So they thought them of the Maldivé Islands, a group of 17 coral atolls 400 miles south-west of Ceylon.

For our purpose they could hardly be better placed. The 93,000 Maldivians are Moslems;

the islands a British Protectorate. The island of Gan is in Addu Atoll—one of two detached atolls of the Maldives that lie to the southward of the Equatorial Channel. There we built a war-time airfield, which we can develop to replace Katunayake.

In Addu Atoll there is also a natural harbour to rival that at Trincomalee, and there we built various war-time naval installations; and could now build more, though scarcely on a scale to replace those at Trincomalee. In any case, the Navy can, of course, rely on the peripheral fuelling stations at Mombasa and Aden.

But all this would cost a lot of money, and the British Government have made too many disastrous investments of late to risk another. They surely cannot forget the £300m. sunk in the sands of Suez, or the £80m. wasted on Jordan since the war, or the millions more that are still going into that distinctly speculative investment, Cyprus.

Clear Title

DOUBTLESS, too, the Government suspected that as soon as the neutralist pack got wind of a British defence project in the Maldives, it would be off full cry to lodge protests with the United Nations. Wisely, therefore, the Government was determined before it launched out, to be quite sure of its title.

For 800 years the Maldives have been a sultanate—except for the year 1953, when the Maldivians tried republicanism instead but found it wanting. The protectorate goes back to 1645, when both the Portuguese and the Moplas of the Malabar Coast were harrying the Maldives.

The Sultan appealed for protection to Ceylon, where the Dutch were then busy driving out the Portuguese. When, in 1795-96, the British in their turn took Ceylon from the Dutch, they inherited the protectorate over the Maldives. Since 1947 our High Commissioner in Ceylon has administered the protectorate.

In mid-December the Deputy High Commissioner, in the High Commissioner's absence, flew to Malé, capital of the Maldives, to negotiate with the Sultan's Prime Minister, Ibrahim Ali Didi, for the lease of the island of Gan.

The Sultanate derives its very modest revenue from fishing and coconut palms. So the rewards for the island's use, together with the income to be derived thereafter from wages and supplies, will be a heaven-sent wind-fall for the exchequer.