

18 APRIL 1958

# Maldives Delay British Air Base Plan

By Charlie A. Gunawardene  
Special to The Christian Science Monitor

## Colombo, Ceylon

Britain has run into difficulties in its bid to set up a key Indian Ocean staging post for the Royal Air Force in the sun-drenched Maldivian Islands.

The Maldivian Majlis (parliament) has expressed dissatisfaction with an agreement reached between the United Kingdom and the former Maldivian Prime Minister, Ibrahim Ali Didi, for the construction of the airfield. The British High Commissioner in Ceylon has made efforts to work out a settlement with the Maldivian Government, but so far has been unsuccessful.

Britain's decision to set up an airfield in the Maldivian Islands, 500 miles from Ceylon, was an immediate sequel to Ceylon's move to withdraw facilities extended to Britain's Air Force and Navy at Katunayake and Trincomalee.

## Neutralist Sentiment

The pull-out from Ceylon forced Britain to look for an alternative staging post in the Indian Ocean, to form a link in the strategic supply line running to the Far East and Australia.

India had earlier indicated its unwillingness to allow British bases on its soil. The Indian and Ceylonese decisions flowed from the policy of neutralism followed by the two countries (in Ceylon since Mr. Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1956), and the belief that foreign bases would compromise their "uncommitted" position in world affairs.

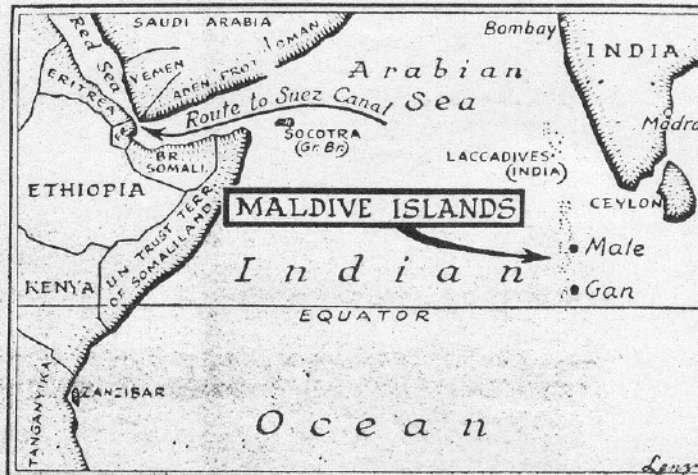
The Maldives, a group of small islands with a total population of about 100,000, are a British-protected state. While the Majlis exercises control over internal affairs, foreign affairs are controlled by the British. The head of state is the Sultan. The people are Moslems.

British control over the islands is governed by a treaty (1887), renewed by an agreement in 1953. A new agreement for the setting up of the RAF airfield was drawn up in 1956, and construction began last year. During the last war, the RAF laid a small airstrip on Gan Island, one of the most isolated of the Maldives. The present plan is to reactivate this strip, enlarge it, and install modern facilities.

## Tied to Resignation

Britain's present troubles stem from the time that Mr. Didi, the Prime Minister, resigned last December. It is likely that had he continued in office, the plans for the Gan Island base would have gone ahead smoothly.

On Mr. Didi's resignation, one of his chief aides, Ibrahim Nasir, a young man of 35, became Prime Minister. This change apparently brought up a more nationalist mood among the Maldivian parliamentarians. The agreement between Mr. Didi and the British was called in question, and the Majlis ap-



Russell H. Lenz, Chief Cartographer

**DISPUTED AIR BASE:** Map shows Maldivian Islands, with Male, the capital, and Gan, where the Maldivians are disputing Britain's right to build an air base.

pointed a commission to report on the matter. It was claimed that the agreement had not been placed by Mr. Didi for ratification by the parliament, and some of its main provisions were not found to be acceptable.

To judge by reports reaching Colombo, some sections of the Maldivian people have been touched by neutralist sentiment, and concern has been expressed that the British, pushed out from Ceylon, should set up an Air Force base in the islands. This is not altogether surprising in view of the Maldives' closeness to India and Ceylon where neutralism is accepted policy.

## Economic Factor Weighed

A fair number of Maldivian youths go abroad for studies—to India, Ceylon, and even Egypt. It was inevitable that some of them at least should be susceptible to the political mood of the countries they visit.

The present situation is, however, not purely a product of neutralist influence, though such sentiment does play a role. The more important factor would seem to be the desire of the Maldivian Government to wrest greater economic benefits from the British in return for the use of Gan Island.

The Maldives are as yet little developed economically, and the bulk of the people live on fish-

ing. The ruling party has obviously seen a good opportunity to win economic favors out of its protectors.

Some form of economic aid was presumably promised in the 1956 agreement, but the Majlis now seem to feel that the provisions are nebulous and inadequate.

## Links to Ceylon

Ceylon has had long connections with the Maldivian Islands and at one time the Maldivian Sultan paid annual tribute to the Governor of Ceylon. The practice ceased only after Ceylon became independent in 1948. Many Maldivians have been educated in Ceylon schools and a good part of Maldivian trade is conducted with this country.

It is therefore natural that developments over the Gan Island airfield should draw attention to Ceylon, and there is every possibility that left-wing political groups here will use these developments to point an anticolonial finger at Britain.

A suggestion, reportedly made by the British High Commissioner here to the Maldivian Government that British economic assistance would be withheld if the Maldives did not cooperate in the building of the base, has also served to create the impression that Britain is dangling a carrot of aid, with strings attached.