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Russia fails in bid for ex-RAF base

By PETER GILL in Male, Maldives Islands

RUSSIAN plans for the former R A F base on Gan in the Indian Ocean included use of both the runway and harbour facilities, President Ibrahim Nasir of the Maldives said yesterday.

Under a proposal for the outright lease of the island submitted to the Government of the Maldives only months after the last British official left, the Russians specified that they should have exclusive control of the area.

Although the stated reason for Soviet interest was "fisheries development," the Maldivian Government rejected the offer before any form of discussions could be held. Moscow's willingness to pay large sums to the tiny archipelago republic was not pursued.

Examining the Cabinet's reasons for rejecting the Soviet offer, President Ibrahim Nasir, 51-year-old President of the Maldives, said in an interview yesterday that "as yet" no one had asked for use of Gan for openly military purposes.

'We cannot side'

"Because we are in the non-aligned movement we cannot side with any superpower," President Nasir said. "That is why the Cabinet would not accept a superpower.

"Suspicion would be created in the minds of other governments. There would be sus-

picion among our friends in the non-aligned movement."

The President said that two other governments had approached the Maldives with a view to leasing Gan, and they had also been rejected. He did not identify the countries, but indicated they were not major world powers.

Private companies were also interested, and discussions were under way with a Bangkok-based firm that was offering a partnership with the Maldives in developing the tourist, fishing and light industries in the region.

Soviet protestations

The President received me in his waterfront office in Male, capital of the Maldives.

The significance of his confirmation of Soviet interest in Gan, even though of a technically non-military nature, lies in Moscow's often-repeated protestations that it has no bases and no interest in bases in the Indian Ocean.

The President would not respond directly when I asked if he supported the "non-aligned" view that the British and Americans should leave Diego Garcia, some 450 miles south of Gan.

But he seemed to acknowledge that for a tiny country like the Maldives there was danger of regional rivalries replacing superpower naval rivalry.