

Maldives in trouble after RAF withdrawal

By PETER GILL in the Maldivian Islands

BRITAIN'S hurried withdrawal from the Royal Air Force base on Gan, in the Indian Ocean, 18 months ago, has presented the tiny Maldivian republic with its gravest long-term economic and political problems.

While the Russians and other powers try to tempt the Maldives into forsaking their new-found "non-alignment" and leasing the base outright once again, more than 800 islanders, sacked by the RAF and the Department of the Environment, have suffered a disastrous fall in their living standards.

Most are still unemployed, with their large families and fellow islanders deprived of the health care, education and prosperity that almost 20 years of a British military presence brought to Addu atoll southern-most of 19 coral atolls comprising the far-flung Maldivian Islands.

"I got married young because of the money I was earning from the British," said a former barman in the officers' mess. "I have had seven children because I could afford them on British pay, and last month my little daughter died of dysentery because the British had left."

Disused hospital

Like other outlying atolls, Addu now has a primary health centre staffed by a single medical assistant for a population of 17,000. It replaces a now disused 120-bed hospital, with 40 beds reserved for islanders, and an emergency service that on occasions included medical evacuation to Singapore.

As a result of rapid development and a much-improved diet, Maldivian mothers on Addu atoll began giving birth to larger babies. The need for Caesarian section deliveries rose steadily.

I asked a senior Government health worker what happened to such mothers now the British had pulled out. "The same as on other atolls," she said. "They die."

Some 120 of the locally-recruited base work force have been retained as caretakers, but at lowly Maldivian, not RAF rates of pay.

Several hundred others have taken the four-day boat journey north to the tourist developments on coral islands near Male, the most developed island which is also the capital.

A senior steward with the RAF earned £1.90 a day, ending the week on overtime with, by Maldivian standards, a mighty pay packet of about £19. Although food and board are provided free in the tourist islands the same man is now earning 100 Maldivian rupees a month — about £7.

The RAF paid "room boys," the male Maldivian equivalent of chambermaids, about £10 a week. Those who have travelled almost 300 miles to the north to do the same job are being paid, with food and board thrown in, 75 rupees a month, or about £5.30.

Land destroyed

From this they have to buy and send food back to their families on Addu Atoll. The 670 acres of Gan used to be the best agricultural land on the atoll, but it was all destroyed to construct the 3,000-yard runway and other base installations.

Addu islanders say they were given about seven months formal notice that the RAF was leaving, but add that they were reassured by Air Force personnel until the very end that the Wilson government might reconsider its withdrawal.

Despite the government's decision to abandon Gan a full 10 years before its agreement with the Maldives expired, individual islanders continue to show a touching personal loyalty to the men and machines of the RAF.

"The day they left we were all in tears, from the base commander downwards," said one waiter who served for all 19 years of the British presence. "I would give anything to see a VC-10 again."

In addition to serious economic dislocation, the British occupation of Gan and the RAF's unexpected departure last year have also poisoned political relations between Male, and the archipelago republic's most distant atoll.

In the late 1950s the three southern groups of islands declared themselves independent

as the "United Suvadivian Republic."

Although the rebellion failed, the people of Male, at that time the only major population centre, suspected a British hand in the revolt and have continued ever since to resent Addu Atoll's separate development under a foreign power.

Some Addu islanders are convinced that the Maldivian government is now bent on exacting revenge and they have been joined by British commentators who have accused President Ibrahim Nasir of conducting a "blood vendetta" against Addu.

In what is understood to be his first meeting with a British journalist last week in Male, President Nasir did not strike me as a vengeful figure or as running a particularly harsh regime.

There is no passport control in the Maldives and foreigners are free to visit every island.

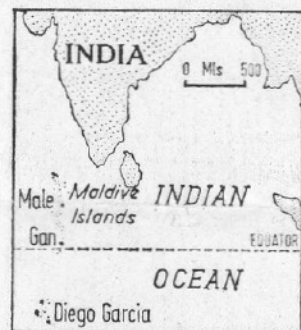
On sensitive domestic matters the President responded frankly and even invited me to visit the island of Fua Malaku where Mr Ahmed Zaki, former Prime Minister, was banished after street demonstrations were held against the President in 1975.

He argued that the over-riding need for political stability in which the country could develop had meant that Mr Zaki and a few others had been banished, "but even the tourists go to visit them."

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The President "strongly denied" that he was punishing the Adduans for their past disloyalty to the Male government, and pointed out that all the rebel leaders had been par-



done, including Mr Abdullah Afeer. "President of the Suvadivian Republic," who was exiled by the British to the Seychelles, where he still lives.

"The standard of living on other islands is not that high but we are not trying to bring Addu Atoll down to the level of other islands," President Nasir said. "We want to develop Addu."

It had not proved possible to maintain all the facilities of the British base and since equipment had been specifically signed over to the Maldivian government by the British much of it had been brought by ship to the north, the President confirmed.

"It is quite true that the British left behind a well-maintained hospital, the sewage system and everything else as it was, but it all worked on big generators, and to keep it going for just one day costs \$2,000," he continued.

"Even with a smaller generator the running costs are so high that the government could not afford them. If the British could not afford to keep Gan, how can the Maldivian government maintain it even for an hour?"

Turning to the sudden British withdrawal, the President said that to give a few months' notice after staying for 20 years was a "very unsuitable timetable."

"People had become orientated into a different way of life. The Adduans had started nothing of their own."

"Not even one fishing vessel had been made in this period and no other industry was started," he added. Maldivian requests for British advice on what to do with Gan and for Ministry of Defence assistance to cushion the economic blow for the local islanders had been rejected.