

Coup attempt in the Maldives: Was it foreign-inspired?

by Ramtanu Maitra

The cluster of coral islands known as the Maldives, strung out like beads in the Indian Ocean, suddenly became the center of high drama, when about 200 mercenaries, reportedly all Sri Lankan Tamil militants on hire, descended on the capital town of Male in the early hours of Nov. 4 to join another 200 or so mercenaries who had infiltrated the island-town. Their assignment was to capture the elected President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and force him to resign.

The President went into hiding, and the mercenaries stormed the presidential palace, but ran out of time as 1,600 Indian paratroopers landed at midnight and rescued the beleaguered President. Although the former Maldives President, Ibrahim Nasir, has been named as the suspected brains behind the coup attempt, the fact that the Maldives has long been of special interest to various foreign nations, suggests the possibility of a greater intrigue.

Nasir and the Tamil militants

As of this writing, it has been established that the mercenaries were hired in Sri Lanka from among the Tamil extremists (who are now involved in a last-ditch battle against both Sinhalese chauvinists and the Indian Peace Keeping Force) by a Maldivian businessman, Abdullah Luthfee, based in Sri Lanka. Luthfee accompanied the mercenaries to Male, and has since been apprehended. Even though it is not evident why the Sri Lankan Tamils participated in the coup, it is widely speculated that the Tamils, under extreme pressure from the Indian Peace Keeping Force, might be looking for an alternative operational base from which to carry out their struggle for a separate state within Sri Lanka.

This much is evident, though; that the Tamils were acting as mercenaries and had very little to do with masterminding the operation.

Former President Ibrahim Nasir, who has been based in Singapore since 1978 when he relinquished the Maldivian presidency to Mr. Gayoom "voluntarily," has been dubbed the prime suspect by the media, notwithstanding his vociferous denials. The credibility of the charge so far rests only

on the precedent of 1980, when Nasir, as subsequent investigation revealed, hired British mercenaries to carry out a similar invasion.

There are reports that Nasir, who heads an oligarchical family in contention for power with President Gayoom's family in Male, wants to get back once again to the helm of Maldives' affairs. In short, Nasir wants again to be the President, feeling perhaps that ten years in exile is sufficient to blur memories of the government charge that he misappropriated \$4.2 million in state funds while he was in office between 1957 and 1978—the charges that prompted him to "voluntarily" give up the presidency.

Nasir and his wife Naseema were directors of Trade Lines, a company started in 1978 in Singapore and de-registered in 1986. The company, as the listing shows, was involved in general imports and exports and in acting as commission agents.

A strategic place

Besides the intense rivalry between Nasir and Gayoom and the former's hunger to return to power, it is not clear who is behind Nasir and why. But it is a recorded fact that the Maldives islands are eyed by many—such as superpowers, gun-runners, and drug-traffickers—as a very important place.

Ruled by the British until 1966, the Maldives is a cluster of 1,190 islands spread out longitudinally over 512 miles. Of all the islands, only 202 are inhabited, with a little more than 200,000 people. Appointed prime minister of the Sultanate in 1957, Ibrahim Nasir became the President of the Republic when the Maldives was granted independence in 1966, and continued to rule the country until 1978, when Gayoom, educated at Al Azhar University in Cairo, was elected President. Gayoom had worked in the Nasir government, and had once been banished for a short while by Nasir for criticizing the President. Since 1978, Gayoom has been re-elected twice; the aborted coup took place less than a week before he was scheduled to begin his third term as President.

When Maldives became independent, the British had not

quite left. They maintained their presence through their Royal Air Force (RAF) base on Gan island, located in the southernmost part of Maldives in Addu Atoll, about 200 miles north of the American naval bases at Diego Garcia. The British had moved their bases from Tricomalee and Katunayake in Sri Lanka to Gan island when the late S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, husband of the Sri Lankan opposition leader, former Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, told the British to pull out its naval and air force bases following his electoral victory in 1965.

Five years before the Maldives received independence, the British had worked out a deal with Nasir by which Britain would maintain the RAF base for 30 years following independence. Under this agreement, signed with Nasir, Gan island was leased to the British in exchange for an outright grant of £100,000 and a promised £75,000 pounds sterling grant for development projects in the islands.

Grabbing for Gan

In 1976, after giving a year's notice, the British prematurely terminated the lease of Gan and withdrew the RAF as part of the liquidation of the British forces east of Suez. Within a year, the Soviets appeared before President Nasir with a deal to lease Gan island for an annual rent of \$1 million for use by its "fishing fleet." Nasir informed the press that he had turned down the offer.

Since the Maldives has not been endowed with either rich and rare minerals or a booming economy, the Soviet interest in leasing Gan island was obviously a part of the Kremlin's plan to consolidate their presence in the Indian Ocean. The purpose was twofold: It would also provide the Soviets an opportunity to keep a close tab on the American naval base at Diego Garcia, subtlet to the United States by Britain.

It is nonetheless surprising that Moscow approached Nasir for a base in Gan at that time, since the Soviets were aware that India would not like further militarization of the Indian Ocean. Perhaps the Soviets were looking at India differently following Mrs. Gandhi's electoral defeat in 1977.

In 1982, President Gayoom turned down an Australian tourism developer who had earlier offered to set up facilities in Gan island with the ostensible commercial purpose of entertaining American seamen stationed in Diego Garcia. The same year, Scimitar Refinery Company, registered in Panama and staffed by British and Canadian personnel, offered to set up an oil refinery in Gan. The offer was kept in abeyance because Maldives has neither crude oil nor capital.

The Gayoom administration has reiterated its stance repeatedly, that the Maldives will not allow any superpower to establish a base in Gan or anywhere else in the Maldives. Maldivian authorities do, however, welcome visits from both U.S. and Soviet warships. According to Foreign Minister Fathulla Jameel, frequent visits of foreign naval vessels do not infringe upon the country's sovereignty, and Maldives welcomes the "visit of ships from both superpowers as well

as from within the region as they contribute to the strength of friendship."

SAARC and security

The location of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean enroute to Africa also attracts others, such as gun-runners and drug-traffickers. Narcotics traveling from the Golden Crescent of West Asia to European consumers, in particular, find the Maldives a convenient transit and transshipment point. Significantly, a number of Maldivians have been arrested for drug trafficking in Europe. In recent years, large amounts of heroin originating in the Golden Crescent have also entered Europe via African countries such as Nigeria. Within Africa itself, Zambia and Zimbabwe have become active conduits for mandrax tablets, a barbiturate of sorts, that find their way from India to South Africa. Mandrax addicts are plentiful in Zambia as well. Drugs coming via the Indian Ocean enter more often through southern Tanzania. Also noticeable is the involvement of Australian seamen in drug trafficking.

All these factors make the Maldives a lucrative location to many. The Maldivian authorities are not unaware of the threat, and rightly made the decision to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) along with Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, the Maldives government has started to develop Gan island, and a few industries and an airport have been set up. President Gayoom has also extended his relations to the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) countries.

Becoming part of the SAARC has served President Gayoom in good stead, as was reflected during the aborted coup. Gayoom, who had escaped to the National Security Service barracks when the mercenaries stormed the presidential palace, contacted the Indian government, among others. The Indian Air Force, using Soviet-made AN-32s and IL-76s, dropped 1,600 paratroops onto the island within 18 hours of the mercenaries' landing at Male. It did not take the Indian troops long to overrun the rag-tag mercenaries, who were then trying to capture President Gayoom from the National Security Service barracks. Sixty-five mercenaries, according to one report, including their leaders—Abdullah Luthfee, Sagar Nasir, and a Sri Lankan Tamil, Anthony Jesudasan—were captured at sea by the Indian Navy and brought to shore for interrogation. Eight hostages, including Maldivian Transport Minister Ahmed Mujithaba, were rescued by the Indian Army.

The Indian intervention in the Maldives was welcomed by most of the SAARC nations. The United States and Britain, two other countries which President Gayoom had contacted on Nov. 4 seeking help, have also expressed their appreciation for the Indian initiative. There is general relief in the region that the democratically elected Gayoom was not overthrown by a group of bandits working for others.

It has also been reported that 500 Indian soldiers will remain in the archipelago till stability is fully restored.