



Interview with **SIR PETER HEAP**

Former British Diplomat and Senior Advisor,
Research Intelligence Unit (RIUNIT)

You are a former diplomat for the British High Commission in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Can you tell us when you first went to the Maldives?

I was the First Secretary in the High Commission in Colombo, Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, from 1963 to 1966. During my tenure, a part of my responsibilities were to deal with the Maldives. That formed a big part of my work over those three years. I was also dealing with Sri Lanka's external relations. Among all the staff in the High Commission, I was the one who spent the most time with the Maldivian Authorities.

How did you travel to the Maldives?

There was no air service to the Maldives at all during that period. There were no regular air links from Colombo to Male. As far as I know, the only place where planes could land was Gan where Britain had an RAF installation so I went to Gan from Colombo by air. It is a small island near to Male where we had representatives for most of the time I was there. Now it has changed massively. The two big things that happened over the period of time was the attempt to resolve the issue of the use of Gan and the resolution of the break away ruler in those southern islands. Maldives was granted independence in 1965 while I was stationed there. The actual signing of independence happened in 1965 between Michael Walker, High Commis-

sioner for the UK in Sri Lanka and the Maldivian Government. Britain decided to pull out its forces and then British presence faded away. However it is important to note that the Maldives was never a British colony and had the status of a British protectorate.

Were there any tourists in the Maldives during that time?

Back then there were no tourists at all in the Maldives. Visits by people from outside were extremely rare. It was a very isolated community. They were somewhat isolated even from Sri Lanka. I did not visit the Maldives very often and my work was mainly in Colombo. I linked with the Maldivian office in Colombo and I also had direct contact with the Maldivian Government in Male.

What was the main source of income for the Maldives back then?

In those days, the Male Government had one source of income and that was the export of Maldivian fish to Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was a good market for Maldivian fish. The Maldives had a particular form of dried fish which had a huge demand in Sri Lanka. Nobody else had that form of dried fish. It was almost a monopoly trade. Dried fish was delivered by boats from Male to Colombo. At present the fishing income has become massively smaller than the tourism income.

Did the British Government have any strategic interests in the Maldives given its location?

There was considerable importance to the British due to the RAF links in Gan and the extreme south. We had what is often referred to as a British military base. In those days Britain had a lot of military installations in the Maldives. During that period, planes could not fly all the way from the UK to those areas where there was a military presence. They had to stop in various places to refuel and that is what we had in Gan. It was a place where planes could land and that was important to the UK at the time. Consequently, the southern islands were much more prosperous than the rest of the Maldives because those planes passing through refuelled and people spent money to stay there.

If you had to pick-out a highlight, what would you say was your most significant contribution to the Maldives during your time?

One interesting footnote to the independence of the Maldives is that there is one little aspect for which I do actually claim quite a lot of credit. In those days there was this steady progression of Britain granting independence to former colonies. There was an assumption in London that membership of the United Nations (UN) was not an automatic right for the smallest countries. Somewhere

along the way, there was a line to be drawn where countries would be considered too small to have full UN membership. London certainly thought that the Maldives lacked government infrastructure and foreign services, etc. to be able to cope with UN membership. It was believed that it was unnecessary to have very small countries as members. I didn't agree with this and it did not make a lot of sense to me. In my view, drawing a line and making small countries feel isolated was not a good way to go about building the UN. Excluding any independent country from the UN depending on their size is did not seem correct. So I had a fairly heated discussion with the High Commissioner and expressed my concerns about this issue. I advocated the idea that the Maldives should have full UN membership and we met with the American Ambassador in Sri Lanka to discuss this further and get their views. With considerable effort, I was able to convince both the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador into allowing the Maldives to have full membership of the UN.

Would you say this incident in turn helped all the other smaller countries in the South Pacific and other Regions?

Yes, it did help to send the message that there is nothing smaller or less developed in terms of diplomacy or strategic importance. However I believe it would

have happened eventually with or without my involvement. I had a few little battles with London and Washington in making this successful.

As the pioneer country representative of the Maldives, how did you make sure that the Maldives got enough international assistance?

We began a small aid programme to the Maldives which we had not done before. Nowadays aid from rich countries to small countries is universal and an important part of international relations. However, even before the second world war, there was very little aid from rich countries to small countries. At that time, the Maldivians wanted to purchase a relatively large used ship as they only had small boats in their fleet. They certainly did not have large ships capable of carrying goods from the Maldives to other countries. I put forward this proposal to London, but the initial feedback was not very positive. However, I persisted in stressing the important of helping out in this matter and the Maldivians did finally get their ship.

One of the conditions of the US joining Britain and France to help defeat the Nazis was that the US wanted the UK and France to decolonise presumably because they wanted to be the superpower. What would be your comments on this?

The US was always for understandable reasons, hostile to European countries having colonial positions going into the 20th century. It was quite understandable since they themselves had been a colony for some years before being granted freedom. They wanted other colonies to become independent as well. Also, after the second world war, it very quickly became apparent that colonies were no longer a part of the modern world, In particular in the case of India. It was more or less promised that India would become independent after the second world war.

What was the reason at that time, in the 1960s, for the British to grant independence to all these countries?

I think the reason was that, even before the second world war, it was no longer politically acceptable for one country to rule another. After the second world war most of the colonial powers such as Britain, France and so on, suffered economically very heavily. Also, there were major independence movements in a lot of countries, particularly in India, before and during the second world war. It was pretty much assumed that right after the second world war, India would become independent and other colonial countries would also gain independence from colonial rule.