

India flexes its muscles

At dawn, a week ago today, heavily armed Tamil mercenaries from Sri Lanka stormed ashore at Male, the capital of the idyllic, Indian Ocean island republic of the Maldives.

Their objective was to seize Male, kill President Abdul Gayoom and to put their reported employer, a former prime minister, back into power.

It was an adventure straight out of Frederick Forsyth's *Dogs of War*. Or, even more, a repeat of the real-life takeover of another remote Indian Ocean island group, the Comoros, by a bunch of tough French mercenaries led by the legendary Bob Denard—who, by the way, is still running the place.

Nothing like this had happened before to the Maldives. The 187,000 islanders lead a tranquil, easy-going life. The Maldives barely has a police force, and no army.

What makes the Maldives notable are magnificent beaches and proximity to India, which lies about 400 miles to the northeast. What makes this story interesting is that besieged president Gayoom called for help from India.

The Indian response was swift, dramatic and decisive. Call it India's own version of the U.S. invasion and rescue of Grenada, another little island that had been taken over by thugs. Indian transport aircraft flew in crack commando and paratroop units while ships of the Indian Navy steamed at flank speed toward the Maldives. The revolt was quickly crushed, leaving about 30 dead.

To add more drama, some of the mercenaries managed to flee in the freighter which had landed them, taking 20 or so hostages. Two Indian frigates shadowed the freighter as it headed for Sri Lanka. One was the *Godavari*, a new, Indian-built frigate I saw on my last trip to Bombay. Indians are justifiably proud of the heavily armed vessel which has added a powerful punch to their navy.

Finally, the freighter was crippled by gunfire from the frigates. Indian commandos were helicoptered onto its deck and quickly secured the ship. The invasion was over, and life went back to normal in the Maldives.

Well, almost normal, since 500 Indian troops will

punch



"What makes you say those loyal to you always drift away?"

ERIC MARGOLIS



remain there for a while — although not too long, the islanders hope.

Some noteworthy points.

- First, the Indian military showed admirable skill, organization and speed in this operation. Their civilian masters acted with atypical resolve and decisiveness.

Compare this small but highly successful mission to the way India blundered into the civil war in neighboring Sri Lanka. Or the political chicanery involved in its double-dealings with Tamils and Sinhalese, and the heavy casualties suffered by the 50,000-man Indian occupation forces there.

• Second, it's intriguing that the mercenaries who invaded the Maldives were Tamils from northern Sri Lanka, the people against whom the Indians have been fighting. Could this be an omen of things to come? Might the Tamils, by now skilled in guerrilla warfare, become the Palestinians of the Indian Ocean? Are the Tamils taking their struggle against India farther afield?

• Third, and most importantly, India's police action in the Maldives was proof of the point I have been making for some time: That India is quickly emerging as an assertive Asian regional power and a near-world power in its own right.

This is well-known to India's smaller neighbors who are growing increasingly nervous as India's military power grows. Last year, for example, India was the world's largest importer of arms.

When last in New Delhi, I queried the highest Indian policy-makers on their intentions toward the Indian Ocean. Was Sri Lanka within India's sphere of interest?

Yes.

Was the Maldives?

Yes.

What about the Seychelles and Mauritius, more than 1,000 miles to the south?

The answer: Probably yes.

In other words, India is fast asserting its presence across the vast ocean that bears its name. India's powerful, fast-growing navy of nuclear-powered attack subs, aircraft carriers, destroyers or frigates and long-range naval bombers will make India's muscle felt from Sri Lanka down to Mozambique.

Meanwhile, India's neighbors, who have been openly grumbling about India's "Big Brotherism" will now have more to complain about. They will not see the intervention in the Maldives as merely an altruistic act of upholding international law and regional order, but a nerve-jarring example of India becoming West Asia's policeman. This is a role India will likely pursue.

Even so, politics aside, India's long-maligned military deserves the honors of the day for a job well and professionally done.