

Maldives gives India deadline to evacuate soldiers

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24 January 2024

Relations between the Maldives and India have deteriorated sharply following the election of pro-Chinese Mohamed Muizzu as president in September last year, ousting the sitting President Mohamed Solih, who has close ties with India. Muizzu campaigned on an India-out platform, promising to send Indian troops stationed in Maldives home and to lessen New Delhi's influence.

Maldives, a small archipelago, is strategically located in the Indian Ocean to the south of India near key shipping water lanes from the Middle East and Europe to Asia. Like the rest of the region, it is embroiled in geo-political rivalry as the US, backed by India, intensifies its aggressive confrontation with China.

The Muizzu government has now issued a deadline of March 15 for India to evacuate its soldiers from the Maldives. New Delhi has agreed to find "mutually workable solutions" to the issue but has said nothing about the deadline.

A contingent of about 80 Indian troops are stationed in the Maldives. According to India, they maintain and operate two rescue and reconnaissance helicopters as well as a Dornier aircraft it supplied by the country to help provide medical assistance to people on remote islands.

During the election campaign, Muizzu's Progressive Party of the Maldives accused India of intending to take over the nation using a coast guard installation it was constructing on the island of Uthuru Thila Falhu, close to Male.

Muizzu told reporters on January 13: "We are not a country that is in the backyard of another country. We are an independent nation... We may be small, but that doesn't give you the license to bully us."

These remarks were clearly aimed at India which is attempting to boost its influence throughout the region. New Delhi has long treated Maldives as its backyard and has arrogated to itself responsibility for maintaining stability.

In 1988, a group of Maldivians led by businessman Abdullah Luthufi and assisted by a Tamil secessionist organization from Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), attempted to overthrow the government. Indian paratroopers and naval forces were deployed to Male and thwarted the coup attempt, restoring President Abdul Gayoom's government to power.

The present deterioration of relations with India was underscored when, breaking with tradition, the newly elected president's first overseas visit was not to India but to Turkey in late November, followed by a trip to China.

Muizzu made a five-day state visit to China from January 8 at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Underlining the importance of Male to Beijing, Muizzu and his wife were given red carpet treatment at the Great Hall of the People followed by a state banquet hosted by President Xi and his wife.

Muizzu has had close relations with China, having hosted infrastructure projects supported by Beijing while serving as mayor of Male, the capital city. During his visit, Muizzu and Xi held official talks and oversaw the signing of 20 agreements covering tourism, disaster risk reduction, the digital economy, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

Muizzu also attended the Invest Maldives Forum in Fuzhou where he appealed to China to send more tourists amid a spate of cancellations of reservations by Indian tourists. Bilateral relations were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, and China agreed to provide financial assistance to the Maldives.

The Maldives has pledged to lessen its reliance on India by diversifying its food imports and foreign medical services. It plans to import food and drugs from Turkey, the US and Europe. Although most Maldivians travel to India and Sri Lanka for medical care, Muizzu said that

those who qualify for the national health insurance scheme could get care in Dubai or Thailand.

Relations with India worsened after three Maldives deputy ministers, Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna, and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid, branded Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a “clown,” “terrorist” and a “puppet of Israel.” To prevent further damage to the relationship, the Maldives government suspended the three ministers on January 8.

The ministers made these comments in response to Modi’s visit to the Indian islands of Lakshadweep, highlighting its beaches and natural beauty. Located 150 miles from the Indian mainland and just 100 miles north of the Maldives, Lakshadweep resembles a miniature version of its southern neighbour. By promoting Lakshadweep, Modi was clearly seeking to undercut Indian tourism to the Maldives. Until recently, the islands saw only 10,000 tourists per year, mostly Indian.

The Maldives is heavily reliant on tourism which brought in \$US3 billion in revenue in 2019, accounting for more than 25 percent of GDP. Following the decrease in outbound Chinese tourism in the past few years, India emerged as the primary source of affluent, high-spending visitors.

After a pro-Beijing government came to power, New Delhi has orchestrated a propaganda campaign against Male. High-profile Indians, including Bollywood stars and government officials, have expressed their disapproval of Maldives in a flood of social media posts that included vacation brochure-style photos of Lakshadweep. EaseMyTrip, an Indian travel service, has joined Indian celebrities in boycotting travel to the Maldives.

China is likely to respond with assistance to Male. The stage is set for countries throughout South Asia including the Maldives to be increasingly dragged into intensifying geopolitical tensions that threaten to plunge the region into a US-led war against China.



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