

Jinnah, the British and the Andamans

Shri C Dasgupta, IFS (Retd)

During the last days of the British Raj, covetous eyes were cast on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands both by Jinnah and by the British defence planners. The Imperial General Staff wanted to detach the islands from India because of their strategic location. For similar reasons, Mr Jinnah wanted the islands for Pakistan. These little known events are worth recounting, if only to underline the strategic importance of the islands. The story is told in declassified British documents compiled in the *Transfer of Power* volumes edited by Mansergh, Lumby and Moon.

The idea of detaching the Andamans was first mooted by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in India. In July 1946, the British Service Chiefs in India prepared a paper on the strategic implications of Indian independence. Revealing a singular lack of political foresight, the Chiefs of Staff argued that "India is at present so divided within herself, that if the British quit India entirely...the country would be left wide open to Russia...History has shown that Nature abhors a vacuum and if the British step out, we can expect the Russians to step in." The committee argued that, in such an eventuality, it would still be possible to maintain imperial maritime communications by pushing them southwards and relying on the Cape route. However, air communications would present greater difficulties. New routes could, indeed, be developed from the British bases in East Africa or the Middle East by building a string of air bases in the Indian Ocean islands – Seychelles, Diego Garcia, Ceylon, the Cocos and the Andamans – but not many existing types of aircraft had the range required for such long hops. The Committee felt that, despite its limitations, this was the only alternative line of Imperial air communications if the India route became unavailable.

The Service Chiefs maintained that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were invaluable in this context. If detached from India,

Shri C Dasgupta is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. He is the author of *War and Diplomacy in Kashmir : 1947-48*.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIV, No. 557, July-September 2004.

they could provide the bases required for maintaining the lines of sea and air communications with Malaya, Australia and the Far East. Unlike Ceylon, they were "just far enough away from India to allow a reasonable degree of security." In a final flourish of political absurdity, the Service Chiefs argued that naval and air bases should be built on the islands "from where to defend Malaya against attack from India"!¹

In London, the Imperial Chiefs of Staff Committee endorsed the appreciation of their counterparts in New Delhi. They strongly urged that Great Britain should retain sovereignty over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. If this was not possible, Britain should at least conclude an agreement with India giving her base facilities in the islands.²

There was a greater sense of realism at the political level. The Viceroy, Field Marshal Wavell, felt that independent India, in her own interests, was likely to turn towards the West rather than to Russia. The real threat to the British interests, in his view, arose from the prospect of political instability and ineffective governance in India. He pointed out that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were part of India and would not easily be given up by an independent government. Only through a defence agreement might it be possible to secure use of the islands as a defensive outpost.³ The Andamans question was considered by the British cabinet on 13 March 1947 (Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy-designate, was also present at the meeting). No decision was reached on the proposal for detaching the islands and the ministers felt that it would be inexpedient to raise the issue with Indian leaders at that stage.⁴

Later revisions of the strategic appreciation shed some of the political crudeness of the original paper but the Chiefs of Staff in London, supported by the Defence Minister, AV Alexander, continued to press the view that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were of "vital importance in the scheme of Commonwealth defence as an essential link in the chain of Commonwealth air and sea communications with the Far East."⁵

As a result of this advocacy, the first draft of the Indian Independence Bill (or the Indian Dominions Bill, as it was then

titled) contained a clause that provided for detaching the Islands from British India (before the transfer of power) through an Order in Council. The clause stipulated that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands "shall cease to be part of India and the references in this Act to India and British India shall be construed accordingly".⁶

Thus in May 1947, when a draft announcement of India's independence was prepared, the document contained no reference to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. On being shown the draft, Nehru pointed out the omission, adding matter-of-factly that the islands would "naturally go to the Indian Union".⁷

The proposal to detach the Andamans leaked out in the press. Mountbatten reported to London that the *Hindustan Times* had carried a "probably inspired" comment on 11 June 1947, to the effect that any such move would be summarily rejected. The Viceroy warned London that a move to detach the islands would "cause an absolute flare-up throughout the length and breadth of India". In light of his advice, the India and Burma Committee of the British cabinet finally decided, on 17 June 1947 – less than two months before India became independent – that it was not possible to pursue the suggestion for detaching the Andaman and Nicobar Islands from India. Alexander made a last ditch attempt to press for retaining these "vitally important" islands but he was overruled by his colleagues. The offending clause was thus deleted from the India Independence Bill.⁸

The allocation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to India drew a strong protest from Mr Jinnah and the Muslim League. The Quaid-e-Azam had followed the British moves with keen interest. Of all the leaders of the subcontinent, he demonstrated the clearest grasp of the strategic value of the Andamans. A Muslim League delegation called on the Viceroy to point out the long term implications of the decision from a Pakistani perspective. India would be in a position to prevent overland movement of troops between West and East Pakistan by denying passage through her territory. The only available alternative was movement by sea and even this would not be possible unless the Andamans were given to Pakistan. Jinnah laid claim to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on strategic grounds, brushing aside the fact that the islands had

a negligible Muslim population. As late as on 5 July 1947, less than six weeks before the Independence Day, he asserted in a telegram to London that "Pakistan's claim to these islands is very strong since only channel of communication between eastern and western Pakistan is by sea and these islands occupy important strategic position on sea route and provide refuelling bases."⁹

The appeal fell on deaf ears. Britain had reluctantly decided to set aside her own designs and concede India's rightful claim to the islands. She saw no reason to violate the canons of justice in Pakistan's interest.

Reference

All references are to Nicholas Mansergh (editor-in-chief): *The Transfer of Power, 1942-7*, HMSO, London. Volumes and document numbers are cited below.

1. vol. viii, doc. 26.
2. vol. ix, doc. 505.
3. vol. ix, doc. 551.
4. vol. ix, doc. 530.
5. vol. x, doc. 553.
6. vol. xi, doc. 191.
7. vol. x, doc. 464.
8. vol. xi, docs. 165, 191 and 221.
9. vol. xi, docs. 463 and 536.