

# MALDIVES REVISITED

Arun Kumar Banerjee



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE  
STUDIES & ANALYSES  
रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

# **Maldives Revisited**

Arun Kumar Banerjee



© Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, sorted in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photo-copying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).

ISBN: 978-93-82169-51-2

First Published: April 2015

Price: Rs. 100/-

Published by: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses  
No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg,  
Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010  
Tel. (91-11) 2671-7983  
Fax.(91-11) 2615 4191  
E-mail: contactus@idsa.in  
Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

Cover &  
Layout by: Geeta Kumari

Printed at: M/s A. M. Offsetters  
A-57, Sector-10, Noida-201 301 (U.P.)  
Mob.: 09810888667  
E-mail : [amoffsetters@gmail.com](mailto:amoffsetters@gmail.com)

**O**n November 3, 1988, there was a coup attempt in the Maldives against the government of President Gayoom. The attempt failed; the attackers fled and Gayoom was saved. India played a crucial role in thwarting this attempt to unseat the legitimate government of a small and friendly neighbour. It provided the immediate military assistance that saved Gayoom's life and re-established his authority.

President Maumoom Abdul Gayoom, a Muslim scholar, who had attended Al-Azhaar University in Cairo and who enjoyed playing cricket, had been in office since 1978. He was widely respected and was into his third consecutive term. Maldives at the time had a form of indirect democracy, wherein the president was elected by the Majlis (Parliament) which in turn was elected through consensus by the people. There was no direct voting or ballots.

Gayoom was expected to visit India at the end of October 1988 to mark the fourth anniversary of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. It was rumoured that this was partly because Gayoom wished to make amends for missing her funeral in 1984. Preparations for a presidential visit were accordingly undertaken and, as was the practice, I reached Delhi two days before his scheduled arrival. However, soon after I reached Delhi, I learnt that the visit was postponed.

It seemed a bit odd, to say the least, that a visit by a head of state should get cancelled at the last minute but stranger things have been known to happen. One soon learned that President Gayoom had called Rajiv Gandhi to request the postponement. But he left everyone guessing as to the reason for this postponement. It was expected that I would find this out on my return. Meanwhile, having arrived in Delhi I took leave to spend time with my family who were in India. We did not have to wait long to find out the reason for this postponement.

Looking back, it is now clear to me, that Gayoom definitely had an inkling that something was afoot. He seemed to have smelt a plot to unseat him during his absence from Male. Gayoom, after all was a cricketer who enjoyed his time at the crease and could play fast

bowling as well as spin. He usually read the incoming ball very well and had good footwork. At this time he was perhaps not exactly sure as to those who were behind the likely plot to unseat him. But he definitely had an inkling of the persons involved since rumblings among dissatisfied Maldivians were being reported to him from time to time. He was also not sure what form the attempt to unseat him might take. But he definitely inferred that those opposed to him would see his visit to Delhi as a potential window of opportunity.

As a keen observer of events, including developments in the region, Gayoom closely followed the events in Colombo and he was well aware that Sri Lanka had become a hot bed of intrigue with numerous Tamil groups being sponsored or supported by foreign governments. He was acutely aware that various intelligence agencies, including R&AW were hyperactive there. Since Maldives had historical close ties with Sri Lanka, especially in the field of education and medical facilities, scores of Maldivians would travel frequently to and from Colombo. Many Maldivians, especially the well-heeled ones, frequented the hotels and night clubs of Colombo and these included his foreign minister and foreign secretary.

November 3, 1988 is vividly etched in my memory. At 6.30 that morning I received an urgent telephone call from Male. There were no cell phones in those days and so I had to get out of my warm ‘raza’ to take the call. In a low, but agitated voice, my secretary informed me that since early that morning (4.30 am) there had been incessant shooting and there were gunmen on the streets. They had attacked the National Security office (ministry of defence/army headquarters) and killed several people. The Maldivians were retaliating but they were outnumbered and outclassed. The gunmen, apparently Sri Lankan Tamils, were trying to capture the president and overthrow the government. The Maldivians wanted India to help them and they wanted that since I should do something about this since I was in Delhi. I was stunned by this news; nevertheless I managed to enquire about the well-being of the high commission personnel. He said that they were safe but added: ‘Who could give any assurance in these circumstances?’

I gave instructions that all our officials and their families should remain indoors and not reveal their identity. If possible they could try to send messages to each other for reassurance by telephone or via neighbours. My secretary said that according to his information President Gayoom was in a safe house and that the Maldivian request for help from India had come personally from him. He added that appeals for help had also gone out to some other neighbouring countries including Malaysia and Pakistan.

I later found out that my secretary was being continuously briefed by Anbaree Sattar, the Chief Security Officer, of President Gayoom. Anbaree had managed to reach my secretary's house incognito in order to send this message to us. Anbaree was a modest man and a good friend. President Gayoom trusted him with his life and years later he rewarded Anbaree by making him minister for defence and later the High Commissioner to India.

I put the phone down and tried to answer the questions posed by my family who were naturally curious because of the expression on my face. I managed to blurt out that foreign gunmen had started shooting everyone in Male and that there was a life threatening situation there. I then phoned the joint secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs (JS BSM) who said that he too had received urgent calls from Male, and, in response to my query as to what next, said that I should come for a crisis committee meeting to be chaired by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at 9 am in South Block.

Reaching South Block I spoke briefly to Foreign Secretary KPS Menon and headed for the committee room (in the MOD). I had only a vague idea of its location never having previously gone there. Soon the room began to fill up and if I remember correctly, the secretary security, TN Seshan was to give the briefing. Those present included the Vice COAS, Lt. Gen. Rodriguez, The DMI, Major General Raghavan, Brigadier VP Malik, KPS Menon, and some more officials. PM Rajiv Gandhi came in accompanied by his joint secretary, R. Sen and JS BSM, Kuldip Sahdev.

The PM summarised the crisis and also recalled his visit to Maldives in 1987. A case was made for providing military help to the

beleaguered government of Maldives and the possible role of the three services was debated. On the issue of responding to the request for military help it was pointed out that this was the first such request for help from a neighbour - it was in fact an urgent appeal, an SOS to save a regime from being overthrown by a coup. Since similar requests had gone out to other neighbours like Malaysia and Pakistan, did we want those neighbours to respond - and successfully - before us? How would the world view us, either way? What would be the implications for India's security? Did we have the military capability keeping in mind the IPKF commitments? The US base in Diego Garcia was not too far, and might they misread us? What were our intentions and motivations? The West had been surprised by the sudden Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Although that was ten years ago, they might wonder if the Indians had suddenly become ambitious and had some tricks up their sleeve, either on their own or along with the Soviets?

The roles of the three forces were also debated and it was agreed that the army was to take the lead role, as this involved flushing out terrorists and possibly hand to hand combat in built up areas. The army seemed to relish this opportunity to settle scores with the Sri Lankan Tamils at whose hands it had recently received a severe mauling in the IPKF operations then underway in Sri Lanka. The roles of the air force and navy were also gone discussed and it was agreed that the air force had a pivotal role in ferrying our forces and thereafter establishing a supply bridge. The navy, it was agreed was to remain on alert and depending on the magnitude of the crisis, as it unfolded, had to start moving, a frigate at a time, for possible back up support. Since all the three arms had been deployed in active and supporting roles in the IPKF operations in neighbouring Sri Lanka, Indian troops and arms were largely in a state of preparedness and in the vicinity of Maldives as well. Overall, the services were pretty gung ho and it seemed they were only waiting for a political signal.

An interesting detail of this wide-ranging discussion related to troops levels – of what kind and in what number? Given the nature of the problem it was agreed that sufficient numbers of our troops

would need to be infiltrated, to take the adversary unawares. We had no clear picture of the “enemy”, numbers, their strength and their back up. This aspect was highlighted by the continuous flow of updates to the crisis committee meeting on the progress of the coup. Casualty numbers were also being regularly updated. In this uncertain environment, we had to deploy our best forces with adequate fire power and backup. Since India did not have “marines” who could be inserted into the theatre, perhaps with the help of the navy, we had to use our regular army jawans. The only such jawans were the men from the Parachute regiments who trained for landing in hostile terrain, being self-reliant and taking quick and effective action. There was however one major drawback of using the Paras. The Paras had to have a DZ (Drop Zone) that was sufficiently large to allow for the parachute drifting and still landing on firm ground. This luxury was not available in the Maldives. The country was made up of islands and clustered into several atolls with water all round. So one had to be lucky to get an island that was as large as a dozen football fields drawn together and this was not possible in Male. Hence, it was pointed out that there could be no para drops as many of our jawans would inevitably drift out into the water surrounding the islands.

Moreover these jawans who were recruited mostly from northern states where there is limited and no tradition of water sports, did not know how to swim, and would drown instantly as they would still be attached to their parachutes in addition to their heavy backpacks containing weapons and ammunition. So, even before the operation got underway we would be taking unnecessary casualties. This would be bad publicity and detract from the objective of this mission; which was to provide timely assistance to a needy neighbour.

A related problem was the parachutes being used by our forces. They were still using the traditional umbrella type parachutes that cannot be controlled by the jumper and which, like balloons, float whichever way the wind blows. These were far inferior to the new rectangular parachutes that had just been introduced in the West that could be hand controlled by the jumper to land in a particular

spot. It was even suggested that our Para regiments should be equipped with these new parachutes for future emergencies.

One of the generals, possibly Major General Raghavan, suggested to the PM that since the High Commissioner in Maldives was present the PM should seek his opinion on this issue. Upon being asked I said that the following factors would be germane to any decision he would be making: a) President Gayoom was the elected President of a democratic country; b) Maldives was a strategically placed friendly neighbour; c) President Gayoom had himself sought our help. However the final decision lay with the PM.

The meeting decided to send in the Agra based independent Para Brigade of the Indian Army in IL -76 (Gajraj) planes while the navy remained on standby. It was also decided to move as quickly as possible, for the help to be meaningful. It was further decided to keep the US in the loop especially because its Diego Garcia base was only few hundred flying miles from the southern most atoll of the Maldives. There was to be no publicity till our forces had landed in Maldives and the operation was to be projected as assistance to a friendly democratic neighbour who had appealed to us. I am not too sure if it was also decided to keep our other neighbours informed.

A couple of anecdotes narrated by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at this meeting may not be out of place here because they reveal the human, even humorous side of his character. The first was his description of Maldives as a dime sized country (which sounds pithy in its Hindi rendition- in fact he used a Hindi expression when first briefed about the problem.) The second relates to his remark to JS BSM about the latter's entire region being in a disturbed state. The 'B' in BSM stood for Burma, though it has since come to be known as Myanmar. Burma was in the midst of a student uprising headed by Aung San Su Kyi- after the results of the general elections were set aside by the military. 'S' denoted Sri Lanka which was in a turmoil because of the Tamil revolt against the central government which was regarded by Tamils as pro Sinhala. It was to help the Colombo authorities that the India Sri Lanka Accord had been signed by Rajiv Gandhi and President Jayewardene and the Indian

army – designated as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) -had been sent in to help the government of President Jayewardene restore order. ‘M’ stood for Maldives that was also engulfed in chaos. Since the Prime Minister was making a factual observation, it was received in silence although it was made as a joke.

The meeting broke up around 11.30 am and I sought to make my way to the MEA in another part of South Block. General Raghavan, out of the blue, suddenly came towards me and putting his arm around me, wheeled me towards Foreign Secretary KPS Menon and sought his permission to borrow me to brief the forces as they prepared for this operation. Mr Menon did not think it was an unusual request and therefore agreed and I was “handed over” to Brigadier VP Malik whose task it was to brief the Para Brigade in Agra on the decisions taken and to give necessary instructions for this operation. All this happened rather suddenly and I had no time to react: one could say that I was carried forward by the momentum, of these rather unusual circumstances. I do however recall looking at foreign secretary and telling him I was not a military man and wondering what briefing I could give prior to a military operation. But, like I said earlier, the armed forces, especially the army were gung ho and having obtained the political clearance they were not only in a hurry to get on with the task but were also prepared to brush aside objections, howsoever genuine.

What happened next was simply extraordinary. Neither I, nor I am sure the foreign secretary had any idea of what was to follow. Under the erroneous impression that the briefing would be in some other part of South Block, I followed Brigadier Malik as he went quickly ahead. Soon we reached the MOD gate on the southern side of South Block, (the car park entrance). We were talking all the while, and not really taking cognizance of much else, and got into a one ton military truck in which we were the only two passengers. Even at this stage I did not register the full implications of this journey as I was under the impression that we were headed towards Delhi Cantonment. During the ride Brigadier Malik told me that we were going to Palam Airport en route to Agra where the Para Brigade was stationed. All I could say to myself was ‘Oh my gosh what

next? At the military apron in Palam airport Brigadier Malik and I boarded an AN 12 which is basically a transport aircraft. Again we were the only two occupants and steadied ourselves by holding onto the hand grabs. (It reminded me of my days as a student in Delhi University journeying in Delhi transport buses: only now there was no crowd and no jostling, but a lot of shaking and trembling as the aircraft took off and landed. At Agra military airport Brigadier Malik and I were taken by jeep to the Para Brigade headquarters to be greeted by a whole host of officers from both the army and the air force. Army headquarters in Delhi had telephonic instructions to start preparations for the impending action and there was an air of anticipation and curiosity about this altogether new venture which the paras and the air force had been ordered to undertake.

There was also an element of impatience to get on with the briefing and one could sense the Paras thinking: 'Let's get on with it'. An element of calm resignation about the potential danger and risk of casualties was also evident. It would be reasonable to say that our troops and airmen seemed mentally prepared as they went about their physical preparation.

It soon became glaringly clear that our forces were at a tremendous disadvantage because of limited or zero data. While our troops are trained to obey their superiors, and in moments of crisis never to shirk or withdraw, they at times, take this to an extreme. It became all too evident in the discussions that took place and the questions asked by the brigade commander, Brigadier Farookh Bulsara, a tough, no nonsense, even bluff officer who asked searching questions of Brigadier Malik. These related to: when, where and how - the nitty gritty of the ensuing operations, to which Brigadier Malik provided suitable answers. But overall, and generally speaking the Paras were asked to improvise on the basis of the limited data and army headquarters expected them to do their best in the circumstances.

During this "operations' briefing, Brigadier Malik mentioned that the MEA was completely on board in this action and as proof referred to the presence, of the high commissioner who had come

to Delhi to prepare for a VIP visit, but was now here to assist in the operation. This was broadly correct, but then who had the time for details. There was a job to be done and the armed forces and the foreign office were together interested in getting it done. In my briefings I outlined the situation and gave them background details that were relevant to their impending task: chiefly, the physical characteristics of a country consisting of 1200 islands of which only 200 were inhabited; the people and their attitude to life. Will they support this coup attempt? Will they be hostile to Indian forces? What was their attitude to Sri Lanka and the internal conflict raging in that country? What were India-Maldives relations like? What was Pakistan's influence in Maldives? And the likely impact of the Muslim angle, and Maldives' friendly ties with Libya and Kuwait.

Along side this macro briefing that was an essential input for the officers of the Para Brigade, I at my own initiative and largely driven by curiosity, enquired about the weaponry that was going to be used in this action. The infantry has a standard set of weapons and they are assessed from time to time, depending on the terrain, the enemy forces, and their likely deployment. This operation took place in November 1988 and now 25 years later I am sure the Indian army is much better equipped and its Standard Operating Procedures now include elements for better mobility and higher calibre infantry weapons with greater firepower. But back then at the Para Brigade headquarters in an atmosphere where confusion reigned, I discerned an element of naiveté when I asked Brigadier Malik this question. I am not finding fault with the army's thinking because given the fact that Maldives is a country of small islands, they must have been wondering about the kind of weapons that would be required? So, when I recommended that we carry jeeps, MMG's, RPG's etc, these suggestions were happily accepted. As later events showed they were necessary inputs.

However so far as the briefings were concerned the best was saved for the last: and this was the air force briefing. After the army's desire to obtain as much information as possible was satiated it was the turn of the air force to check out a few things from the high commissioner. I was accordingly taken to another room where

a large map was spread out on a table. The air force (44 Squadron) was seeking inputs for briefing their pilots. While listening to them my eyes, and my mind kept focusing on the map on the table in front of me. After a while I switched off from the verbal process and focused more sharply on the map. Somehow it didn't seem right and I thought something was missing. The air force was planning to land at the Male International Airport in Hulule. Hulule is an island close to Male, a fifteen minute ride by a traditional boat (Dhoni). This airport was built by an Indian public sector company and the runway has an East-West orientation. Apart from the airfield (including the tarmac, the terminal building, the customs and the security) and the boat jetty, the island was uninhabited. The near total lack of information for such a major international venture by India was woefully obvious when it suddenly became clear to me that, laid out on the table in front of me was not a map of Hulule but of Gan, an airport three hundred or so kilometres south of Male. I am not given to blowing my trumpet but I have often wondered what would have been the fate of this military venture if I had not spotted the mistake I almost shouted, more in relief and exasperation, that this was a wrong map. I explained that the Hulule runway orientation was East-West while the map in front of me had a North-South orientation. The airport in Gan was a disused former RAF base. That our premier air force strategic airlift units flying the IL-76 were still dependent on these coordinates made me shiver. I confess my loud interjection had the desired impact and the Gan map was pushed aside while some officers rushed to bring the Hulule map, that was available, fortunately, somewhere in the archives.

With the Hulule map in front of me I pointed out that the airport had only a limited number of aprons (tourist flights to Male in those days were closely coordinated to avoid congestion and flights from European destinations made a rapid turnaround after taking advantage of cheaper fuel in that airport.) I added that one could not be sure whether some of the coup plotters had not already taken control of the airport. An intrepid coup planner could well place two men with rifles on the runway to stop anyone from attempting to land; a cheaper option would be to place an empty

truck across the runway. There was an animated discussion on the risks and costs involved since there was no other way our paratroops could be inserted into that arena. A related issue was the landing procedure. By this time it was well past 2 pm and the estimated time of departure from Agra was initially around 5 pm. The arrival time in Male was calculated between 8 pm and 9 pm when it would be dark. How would the pilots manage the landing procedure? When were they to put on the landing lights? Should they put them on at all? A related question was how the pilot would judge the runway in the possible absence of any runway lighting. They were flying to that airport for the first time and had no previous experience.

Fortunately for the operation, information had been trickling in at Agra about the conditions in Male and the progress of the coup. By early afternoon we were informed that the airport had not been attacked and some NSS troops had managed to secure it. But the information from Male was unverifiable and had to be used cautiously. Reports also indicated that while the shooting in Male had subsided, senior dignitaries like ministers were in danger because the coup plotters were now picking up hostages. There were also conflicting reports about how these terrorists had come in: it was obvious that they had come by sea and one suspicious vessel had been spotted in Male harbour. Could this ship be harbouring more men? Reports by now had practically confirmed that all the terrorists were Tamil speaking and had come from Sri Lanka.

Late that afternoon with the army and the air force finalising their arrangements, I felt that I had fulfilled my purpose and I didn't mind heading home. But I was in Agra and there was no way I could get home until my hosts decreed that I could. Then came the biggest surprise of all - in a day full of surprises. Brigadier Malik said that he would be accompanying the troops led by Brigadier Bulsara to Male. He would however return to Bangalore after the troops had landed. Would I be interested in joining him? Brigadier Bulsara joined, in reiterating that request. Whether these two professional soldiers were paying me a compliment by asking me to join them in the very first military venture of this kind by India or whether they were short of confidence because they were flying

out to a foreign land for a military operation and would feel reassured if a foreign office officer (the high commissioner to that country) was with them is something that I have not been able to figure out for the past two and a half decades. It was clear from my intensive interaction with them for several hours that day that they valued my inputs and were impressed by my understanding of military logic during discussions. My accompanying them would be a morale booster. We were flying into the unknown and a man with local knowledge was a useful person to have with them on board.

However despite the dual requests I refused, stating that my role ended, just where theirs was to begin. Brigadier Bulsara pointed out that this was a military political operation and had been so right from the first decisions in Delhi. He added that by accompanying Brigadier Malik to Agra and by taking part in the joint briefing I had acknowledged that position. Appreciating his argument I said that I would only get in the way since I was not a military professional. He scoffed at my argument by saying that I thought like a military professional. We had a long discussion but I remained adamant. Finally, he said that we all had to serve the country in our own way. At this point I relented but put forth two conditions before proceeding further.

I said that since I was in their hands and my instructions from Delhi covered only briefing the services, a message had to be sent to the Ministry of External Affairs by the brigade headquarters through the Army Headquarters that they had requested me to join the assault team and I was ready to join them for the success of the operation. My second condition was somewhat simpler. I said that I needed a razor as I always started my day with a shave and I could not contemplate the next morning without one. Since the Brigade headquarters were in constant touch with army headquarters my first condition was easily fulfilled and I was informed that the Ministry of External Affairs had been fully advised. However for my second condition the commandant ordered his officers to have the canteen opened (for some reason it had closed early for the day) and a suitable shaving kit complete with a toothbrush and

towel was brought for my use. So when the troops of the 50<sup>th</sup> Para brigade started boarding the two IL- 76 aircraft complete with their assault rifles and infantry weapons I boarded the lead aircraft with Brigadier Bulsara, Commandant, 50<sup>th</sup> Para brigade and Brigadier VP Malik complete with my shaving gear. I wonder if people would believe me if I said that once in the aircraft, I not only realised the enormity of the situation but also realised I was hungry as I had not eaten anything throughout the day. One had been carried away by the excitement and continuous activity and the mind was totally diverted - even from food. Before take off at about 6 pm, ration packs were distributed to the officers on the flight deck – where I sat with them.

Looking back, I don't recall any sense of excitement on board the flight. One would have thought that flying in a military aircraft full of soldiers for a military operation in an unknown environment would be enough cause for excitement. But it was the exact opposite. It was no child's play, we were from the armed forces and the diplomatic service of India on our way to offer aid and assistance to a foreign country in an uncertain environment - and there were more uncertainties than certainties. A whole number of "what ifs" sprang into mind and when we were not quiet and contemplative we were discussing options.

What were some of the what-ifs on our minds? The very first what-if was: What if the runway was not secured? A related what-if was what if the airport was in "enemy hands" Although reports from Male had indicated that the NSS had taken control of the airport, but this could always change.

A next what -if was, whether the runway was safe; what if the lights were not turned on? Could the pilots "see" in the dark?

Another what-if was about the airport perimeter; it was after all an island, but in the absence of maps, the army no idea of its size and therefore no decision could be made about troop deployment to secure a perimeter. In the dark of the night it would have to be a step by step affair.

Another what-if was the journey to the capital, Male. It was another island about a mile and a half – or 15 minutes by a dhoni, from Hulule. What if there were no “dhonis” at Hulule or what if there were no boatmen.

While the commander of the task force Brigadier Bulsara and I (and one or two of his colonels) discussed various details and options on the deck, the jawans of the Para Units (the 6th Paras) were going about their preparations during the flight. It was decided that since the aircraft would be in total darkness troops would fan out in an assault mode expecting the worst. The aircraft would be vacated as quickly as possible and it would turn around and take off immediately; I think each aircraft was given about ten minutes to do so.

Around 9 pm we went up to the pilots deck and after a while observed light signals confirming that we were above Hulule. Some NSS soldiers guarding the airport installations were sending these signals and soon we were ready to land. I don’t know what went on inside the minds of the professional soldiers and how they were feeling and what their thoughts were. As for me I felt I was in good hands and we were doing well. The aircraft was emptied pretty quickly and before long I was on the ground. Brigadier Bulsara made sure that we were close together and the detachment providing him cover kept me in their shadow; in short I was his protegee.

On the runway it was pretty noisy and windy and the troops were fanning out. Brigadier V.P. Malik who later became COAS and who had planned to escort the first aircraft and after ensuring a safe landing was to return in the aircraft to Bangalore asked me what I would like to do; to return with him on the plane to Bangalore or would I like to stay. I didn’t hesitate in my reply and said that he could go back but I was going to stay. In my mind, I was clear; I had returned to my charge where, in my absence there had been an attempted coup, and, the matter still needed attention and I was going to be a part of this action. There was also the matter of the High Commission staff and their families and I had to make sure

they were safe and looked after; they worked under me and I was not going to abandon them.

The paratroopers having fanned out had begun taking charge of the airport by seizing the control terminal, the office installations and the jetty. At the control terminal an effort was made to establish radio contact with the president at his secret location in Male. This was done and after I had greeted the president briefly, and informed him that India had taken immediate steps to come forward to help him in response to his urgent appeal. I handed the mike to Brigadier Bulsara who told the president that the Indian Army had arrived and was in Hulule and that the president had nothing further to worry about. This call reassured the President about Indian assistance to his government and his country.

It was now necessary to move with speed and reach Male. Some NSS officials who had secured the airport during the day now emerged from the darkness. I recognised one or two of them as they were normally deployed at the president's office and/ or at the ministry of foreign affairs. More importantly several of them recognised me and that made our task easier. Together with Colonel Joshi, CO of 6<sup>th</sup> Paras I requested the NSS men to help us to get to Male and arrange dhonis for our journey. Several dhonis lying side by side on the jetty were commandeered and our Paras led by Major Dhillon of 6<sup>th</sup> Paras, set off for Male. The NSS officials acted as the boatmen of these lead dhonis.

Major Dhillon was soon able to establish a beach head in Male. Male was still under the control of mercenaries and we could hear sporadic firing from there.

Brigadier Bulsara and I then made our way to the western side of the island to have a better view of Male which lay across the calm sea. We saw the lights of the capital which looked peaceful; we also saw the lights of the harbour and several ships anchored there. I had never seen Male from this perspective earlier and I must say I liked what I saw. The only discordant element were those pesky mercenaries, hiding somewhere amidst those lights. Once we got rid of them everything would be fine I said to myself.

It also occurred to us that the ship that had brought these mercenaries was still in the harbour and we wondered which of those lights belonged to that ship. We kept looking closely trying to spot anything unusual. For a while there was nothing unusual. Then, a little later, I spotted a whole set of lights gently, ever so slowly, moving, as if gliding out, to our left. It suddenly occurred to me that it was a ship moving out of the harbour. Brigadier Bulsara and I had got separated in the meantime and so I shouted out to him that a ship was moving out of harbour. It was past midnight on November 3, and only a suspicious ship would be moving out at this hour. Brigadier Bulsara agreed that it was indeed a ship and was probably the one that had ferried the mercenaries from Sri Lanka and was now trying to get away. He barked out orders to the troops on the perimeter facing the sea channel and mentioning the location of the ship, ordered them to fire. He barked two or three times and boom went the RPGs/ MMGs. Our jawans fired four rounds but by then the ship had picked up speed and sailed out of range. Brigadier Bulsara was disappointed with the slow reaction of our jawans and cursed out loudly. However one of his officers from that perimeter came rushing to him and reported a couple of hits. As the ship was moving away Brigadier Bulsara with a couple of his officers rushed to the southern side of the island.

The ship was fired upon again and it received three more hits (as confirmed by the fleeing mercenaries later). Brigadier Bulsara ordered that the ships coordinates be sent out by wireless to our naval base in Goa so that they could take further follow up action. The ship moved in a south- south westerly direction from where we were standing towards the Straits of Malacca passage.

The ship was traced on the high seas by the navy's IL-38 maritime reconnaissance planes the next morning and during the course of the day i.e. November 4, the *INS Godavari* and *INS Betwa* closed in on it and eventually captured it on November 5. This ship was the *MV Progress Light* and it had on board the fleeing Tamil mercenaries who had taken nearly a dozen Maldivian hostages including their minister of shipping, Ahmed Mujtaba and his wife.

Once the ship left the harbour Brigadier Bulsara figured that all the mercenaries would have fled and Male would be safe. Of course there could still be the odd group/ suicide detachments left but that possibility had to be faced or discounted. Meanwhile he had heard from Colonel Joshi (called Joe) that he and his boys were making steady progress with the help of NSS guides to reach the president's hideout. Brigadier Bulsara then decided, and I concurred, that he should now lead a party to go to Male to meet the President. Accordingly he put on his helmet and I too joined him in wearing one. This time Brigadier Bulsara sought to dissuade me from coming with him, but I was having none of it. I insisted on going with him and the two of us with our protective detachment got into a dhoni and headed for Male.

We were led from the jetty in Male by Joe and some of his boys and eventually reached the resident's safe house. We found that the President safe; he looked shaken but was in full command and was happy to receive us. He had with him his foreign minister and one or two others. He thanked us for the timely help and requested that he wanted to speak to the PM. President Gayoom personally thanked Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and informed him that the commander of the Indian forces and the high commissioner were with him. He expressed his gratitude for this timely assistance. Even in these circumstances a couple of photographers managed to capture the moment.

By now it was getting light; it was nearly 24 hours since the mercenaries first landed. We took leave of the President and Brigadier Bulsara and I went for a walk in Male. Evidence of rampage was all around. There were a few dead bodies, empty bullet casings and garbage strewn all over the streets which were nearly deserted when we started our walk. As news of the arrival of the Indian forces spread and Maldivians learned that their president was safe people started coming out of their houses and towards the end of our walk towards the jetties there were people lining the streets expressing their gratitude, waving and clapping as we went past. At this point I took leave of Brigadier Bulsara who went back to Hulule and I headed for the High Commission. Brigadier Bulsara

had ordered a protective detachment to remain with me for as long as I wanted; it was to guard me 24 hours and would be deployed at the High Commission premises or at the residence.

**T**his Occasional Paper is a brief first-hand personal account of the events, discussions, decisions and the action taken in November 1988 by the Government of India to provide help to the Government of Maldives to quell an attempted coup.



**Arun Kumar Banerjee** joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in 1967 and served for nearly four decades in various capacities and assignments in the Ministry of External Affairs. As the Indian High Commissioner in Maldives, he was the only career diplomat to have directly taken part in a military operation in India, and played a pivotal role in quelling the attempted coup against President Gayoom in November 1988. He also played a crucial role in Sierra Leone, affecting the release of Indian soldiers taken hostage as part of a UN Peacekeeping operation.

Ambassador Banerjee is an alumni of St Stephens College, Delhi College of Economics, and Balliol College, Oxford.

#### **Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses**

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg,

Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010

Tel.: (91-11) 2671-7983 Fax: (91-11) 2615 4191

E-mail: contactus@idsa.in Website: <http://www.idsa.in>