


New Delhi pins its prestige on Mauritius project

The Agalega effort is crucial after setbacks in Seychelles and Maldives

Unease over Agalega



India's involvement in the Agalega project has caused disquiet in Mauritius

- The MoU for the project was signed in March 2015 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit
- It is to commence in Feb. 2019 and end in 2021
- India agreed to provide approximately \$87 million to build an airport terminal, extend its runway and refurbish jetties

▪ The Agalega archipelago consists of two sparsely populated islands about 965 km north of mainland Mauritius. It has a population of 300

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As work gets under way on one of India's prize projects in the Indian Ocean to upgrade facilities on the Agalega islands in Mauritius, the government is watching a battle brewing in the Mauritius parliament over the project.

After facing resistance over placing its helicopters in the Maldives' Addu Atoll and the virtual cancellation of its project to develop the Assumption Island in the Seychelles earlier this year, New Delhi is moving swiftly but quietly to ensure its project in Mauritius – to construct a jetty, rebuild and extend the runway, and build an airport terminal – does not run into trouble.

The \$87 million project, to be funded by India, has been awarded to AFCON construction group and RITES engineering consultancy. Surveys have begun to fulfil the contract signed on September 28 this year, which stipulated that construction begin by February 12, 2019, and be completed in 2021.

SUNDAY SPECIAL

Earlier this week, Prime Minister Pravin Jugnauth's government faced tough questions in the National Assembly over Indian involvement in the project and its costs and whether it would involve a military component.

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“Agalega is and will remain a Mauritian territory,” Vice-Prime Minister Fazila Jeewa Daureeawoo told the Assembly on Tuesday. “This is an important project. We don’t want the jetty and the airstrip to remain in poor condition,” she added.

In 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi had witnessed the signing of the agreement for Agalega Islands, the MoU had provided for “setting up and upgradation of infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity” and enhancing “capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island.

However, since then, there have been growing reports over the Indian Naval and Coast Guard’s interests in setting up transponder systems and surveillance infrastructure, which has led to some local protests.

In March this year, several islanders, including some from Agalega, which has a tiny population of 300, formed the “Koalision Zilwa Pou Lape” (Islanders Coalition for Peace), to lobby against the Agalega project. The protests were fuelled by the fact that Mauritius is in a major international legal battle over the ownership of its Chagos Island at present, which were turned into the U.S.’s “Diego Garcia” naval base in the 1960s. France maintains naval bases in the Indian Ocean and stations frigates off its Reunion islands, while China has a string of naval assets in the region from Gwadar to Djibouti, all leading to fears of their peaceful island region becoming increasingly militarised.

However, Indian officials

point out that India’s projects in the neighbourhood have never been acquisitive or “colonial”.

“Unlike the military bases run by other countries, the Indian model is of a soft base,” explained a government official. “We don’t bar locals from moving through any Indian-made project. So these governments get more control over their domain, without diluting their sovereignty,” the official added indicating that the government believes the protests are the product of “misunderstandings and some motivated elements”.

Opposition determined

Mauritian opposition members say they will continue to protest the government’s “lack of transparency” over the project, and the fact that the Mauritian government has exempted the project from any Environmental license process (EIA clearances).

Worries for India stem from the fact that it was just such protests, that began on a very small scale in the Seychelles, that led to plans for a coast guard facility on the Assumption Islands being shelved, after President Danny Faure said he lacked the parliamentary strength to ratify it.

The setback, according to speculation, may have been chalked up to China’s heavy investment in the Seychelles.

India needs to project itself as a credible and long term partner in a more persuasive manner, than what has been the experience in recent years,” Commodore (Retd) Uday Bhaskar of the Society for Policy Studies told *The Hindu*.