

Fiji's re-entry into C'wealth: India to wait for poll outcome

By Amit Baruah

ADELAIDE, JUNE 23. India has said that it would like to ponder over the results of the August elections in Fiji before agreeing to let the island nation return to the Commonwealth and has sought Australia's support to its stand.

However, the Australian Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, impressed upon the visiting External Affairs Minister, Mr. Jaswant Singh, that Fiji should be allowed to rejoin the Commonwealth immediately after the elections.

In fact, Australia wanted the process of Fiji's return to the Commonwealth to begin in early September when the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) would meet in London. This, obviously, would be in preparation for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Brisbane from October 6-9.

Hammering out a common position on the issue is crucial since India has been operating through Australia and New Zealand on the question of Fiji. Asked about the issue at a joint press conference, Mr. Singh said yesterday that there was no "new policy" in place as far as India was concerned.

"We have consistently supported the... restoration of democracy, primacy of the 1997 Constitution. We are very glad that elections are now due to be held and we do not wish to say anything that even in the slightest manner interferes (with) or influences the electoral process... it is our hope that the electorate of Fiji will throw up an answer...to the problems..." he said, adding, "it is my hope that the democratic process — whatever (leader/Gov-

ernment) it throws up is acceptable to the people of Fiji."

For his part, the Australian Foreign Minister, Mr. Alexander Downer, said: "We see the elections at the end of August as an enormous step forward towards the resolution of the problem of Fiji and we are providing direct Australian Government support for that process in two ways... we will be providing financial support to the Fiji electoral commission... and secondly we are looking at sending observers as well for those elections."

Mr. Downer said Fiji had an opportunity to get back into the international mainstream through the election process. "There is a real prospect of us lifting our sanctions on Fiji... provided the elections are free and fair... and due process is followed."

During his visit, Mr. Singh also met the Indian High Commissioners to Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea and discussed Fiji among other issues.

India, clearly, wants to maintain the diplomatic pressure on Fiji to ensure not only that elections are held properly but any Government that emerges is allowed to function normally. The former Fijian Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhry, also flew down to Sydney earlier this week to hold talks with Mr. Singh in a sign that he attached considerable importance to the Indian diplomatic posture.

Mr. Singh, who returned to Sydney today, travels to New Zealand where, presumably, the Fiji issue will once again come up for discussions during his meeting with the Prime Minister, Ms. Helen Clark, and the Foreign Minister, Mr. Phil Goff.

Mauritius gets Coast Guard vessel on lease

By Our Staff Reporter

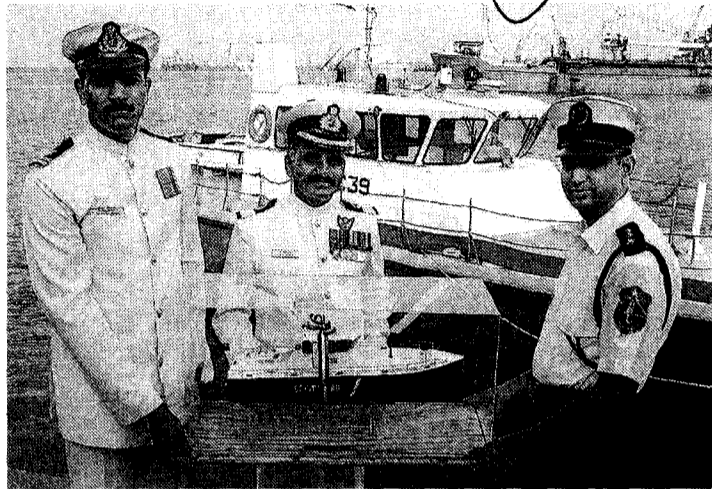
CHENNAI, MARCH 23. An Indian Coast Guard vessel was today "transferred" to Mauritius, on a five-year free lease, to "promote maritime interest" and to "reinforce the bonds of friendship and cooperation" between the two countries.

The Coast Guard Commander (East), Commodore R.S. Vasan, formally handed over the vessel, C-139, the ninth of the 10 AMPL class of boats, to Mr. Mahadeo Malloo, Chief Inspector, Mauritius Coast Guard, at a ceremony at West Quay, Chennai Port here.

The vessel, inducted into the Coast Guard in 1997 and based in Chennai, will go a long way in enhancing the capabilities of the Mauritius police, Mr. Malloo told *The Hindu*. In Mauritius, the responsibilities of the Coast Guard too was vested with the police, he added.

The Rs.1-crore boat, which can achieve a maximum speed of 28 knots, has earned a reputation for its high maneuverability and was best suited for patrolling coastal waters. The boat has been used off the Chennai coast for anti-smuggling, anti-piracy and search and rescue operations.

Mauritius has one offshore patrol vehicle, 10 ships and about 50 smaller crafts. The country's exclusive economic zone extends



Commodore R.S. Vasan, Commander, Coast Guard Region (East), handing over a model of the C-139 boat to the Mauritian Coast Guard Chief Inspector, Mr. Mahadeo Malloo, in Chennai on Friday.

for about 1.8 million square km. "Both our countries share a strong bond of friendship. Defence cooperation between the two countries can be traced back to the days of formation of the Coast Guard in my country," said

Mr. Malloo. "This is the second ship that India is giving us," he added. The first ship, INS Amar, was given to Mauritius about three decades ago. Also, the Mauritius Coast Guard's flag ship, Vigilant — an off-shore patrol vessel — was begun repaired and refitted in Mumbai now.

Commodore Vasan said the MoU was signed by a representative of the Ministry of Defence and the Acting High Commissioner of Mauritius on March 22.

He stressed the need for greater cooperation between countries in the region in view of the growing incidents of piracy in the Indian ocean region.

The 44-tonne boat will be transported to Port Louis on March 27 or 28 by a merchant vessel, Impala.

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