

Independence expected by June next year

Independence is coming to another group of islands in the Indian Ocean and the big powers will be watching developments. At a constitutional conference in London tough bargaining between the political leaders ended when they agreed to form a coalition. The aim is to achieve independence by June next year.

Another state takes shape in a troubled area

JAMES Mancham, Chief Minister of the Seychelles, and opposition leader F.A. Rene have flown back to their Indian Ocean island capital of Victoria to form a coalition government and thus to try to resolve arguments about the path to independence they could not settle at the conference table in London.

The talks in London were held to work out an independence programme for the 9-island, 60,000 population, British colony which lies 1,000 miles off the African coast.

Miss Joan Lester, Britain's Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who was chairman, found it tough going. In the end she settled for a scenario that goes like this:

Formation of a coalition government; appointment of a commission to review the electoral system;

by Derek Ingram

self-government under an interim constitution; another conference in London next January; and full independence by June 30 next year.

Between Mancham's Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP) and Rene's Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP) there was a major dispute over the way the constituencies are currently worked out.

The SPUP have only two seats in the Legislative Assembly, yet they polled a much higher proportion of the votes at the election a year ago. The SPUP wants the constituencies altered and it therefore objected to independence being agreed before another election is held.

After a long wrangle the party leaders held talks outside the conference room and "in the spirit of national reconciliation" agreed to form a coalition.

Currently, the Legislative Council contains 15 elective seats. There will now be an extra 10 members - five from each party - and a cabinet of 12 - eight from the SDP and 4 from the SPUP.

The Electoral Review Commission to be appointed will report on the election

system and the size and composition of the legislature, and make its recommendations to Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary James Callaghan before the end of this year.

The progress of the Seychelles to independence will be carefully watched by the big powers; the colony lies between East Africa and the Maldiv Islands (where recently a coup took place). It will be another country in the area, along with India, Sri Lanka and Mauritius and the African countries, that will press for the Ocean to become a zone of peace.

Two island groups which belonged to the Seychelles - Aldabra, Farquhar - and the isle of Des Roches, were detached in 1965 and formed (together with the Chagos Archipelago, which once belonged to Mauritius) the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Once of these islands is Diego Garcia which Britain allows the Americans to use as a limited base.

Mancham and Rene reminded the British of the 1965 split-up in their opening speeches to the London conference and both claimed the islands should be restored as part of the Seychelles. They will return

to the subject in January.

Britain would have no objection to handing these islands back to the Seychelles; the only part of the British Indian Ocean Territory Britain is concerned about is Diego Garcia. It would have to consult the Americans and the island is not claimed by Seychelles anyway. Aldabra is a bird sanctuary and ornithologists would not object to its return to the Seychelles.

For several years neither party in the Seychelles had wanted independence; later Rene changed his stance and then Mancham was forced to the view that he would have to go for it. The Organisation of African Unity pressed him and Britain did nothing to dissuade him from asking for independence. It is longstanding British policy to give independence to as many of its remaining mini-colonies as possible.

At one time Mancham's party wanted integration with Britain and a status similar to the Channel Isles or the Isle of Man. But this formula, often proposed by smaller colonies, had never been favoured by successive British governments.

Mancham found it difficult to explain to the OAU, the non-aligned countries, and the UN why he did not want

independence. But he is still not over keen on the idea. "It is with a certain sense of melancholy," he said in London, "that I shall call for a severance of ties with Britain."

He intends to apply for membership of the Commonwealth, the OAU and OCAM (the Afro-Malagasy Joint Organisation) and Queen Elizabeth will remain Queen of the Seychelles. He says: "We are under no illusions. Maintenance of a democratic system will need constant vigilance."

Mancham can afford no defence for his scattered group of islands. Britain is not interested in any defence treaty. Mancham says: "We won't have any meaningful defence patrol. We might think of having one or two patrol boats, but I don't think much will happen. And we don't want to sell our soul."

For a livelihood, Seychelles will rely mainly on its natural beauties, its sand and sea, its mountains and its blue lagoons, all of which are attracting increasing numbers of tourists - 27,000 in 1974, a projected 40,000 in 1976.

The tourist trade has been built from scratch in four years following construction by Britain of a HK\$60 million airport. Until that opened Seychelles was largely isolated.

Mancham feels he has a problem in creating a national identity for the island and a self-awareness among his people, a mixture of descendants of early French settlers, a small number of other Europeans, Africans (mainly descended from freed slaves), Creoles (of mixed race), Indians and Chinese. Mancham himself is part Chinese, part Creole.

The Seychelles were uninhabited until the French occupied them in 1768.

Britain took possession in 1810 and administered them with Mauritius. In 1903 Seychelles became a separate colony.

Seychelles was little touched by the African Wind of Change in the 1960s. In the mid-sixties there were still only five elected members in the Legislature. But now, history has caught up with the colony and next year another minor chapter in British colonial history will come to a close.

