

BRUNEI

A friendly and final farewell

By Dinah Lee

London: It was a fairly unclouded sunset on one of the last surviving fragments of the British Empire as Brunei announced on June 29 it would assume full international responsibility for its defence and foreign affairs as an independent state at the end of 1983. The agreement was worked out in half a dozen negotiating sessions between Foreign Office representative Lord Goronwy Roberts, the Sultan of Brunei, Sir Muda Hassanal Bolkiah, and his adviser/spokesman father, Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin.

The British have been making it clear for quite some time that their presence in Brunei in the form of Gurkha troops and their responsibility for Brunei's external defence and foreign affairs were both incompatible with their policy of



Sir Muda: Strengthening defence.

withdrawing all British troops east of Suez, and anomalous in a modern political context (REVIEW, June 2). But the likeable and shrewd Asian elder statesman clung to the paws of the British lion out of genuine fondness for things British, and a real or imagined fear that leftover members of the defunct Party Rakyat Brunei might attempt to seize power.

Last week's discussions were peculiarly amicable. The senior Sultan impressed the British team with his composure in negotiation and his ability to recall previous conversations, stretching back even two decades ago. He was known to have wished at one time for 20 more years under the British umbrella, but last week seemed prepared at the outset

for a final, more immediate decision.

The ruler has certainly been given ample time to strengthen his defences. The Royal Brunei Malay Regiment had about 96 officers and 1,800 other ranks in 1975, armed with automatic M16s. The heavier British-made 7.62 SLR is held as a reserve weapon, forming the main equipment of the seven platoons of the Brunei Cadet Corps from the seven colleges of Brunei. The Air Wing, including its seconded RAF staff, has at its command three helicopters for communications and casualty evacuation duties, two Bell 205A Iroquois, four Bell 206A Jet Rangers and four Bell 212 helicopters, as well as a twin-turbo-prop Hawker Siddeley 748 transport.

BUT the Sultan, now responsible for his own defence, has already decided to re-equip his forces. British Aerospace will now go ahead with negotiations for a £40 million (US\$75.47 million) contract for Rapier missile systems, on the grounds that nothing prevents Brunei buying more from them now that the country's status is established. Whether more advanced defence systems follow will depend not on the Sultan's pocket, but on the degree of reassurance he receives from his Asean neighbours.

Those looking for reasons for the Sultan's more relaxed approach to the prospect of independence point to an improved atmosphere of solidarity among the Asean nations, and the resultant confidence on the part of the Sultan in assurances received from other countries in the region that they have no designs on his oil-rich country, and that they would welcome his becoming more allied with cooperative regional interests.

The Sultan may also have observed that Asean is pressuring its members to avoid inter-regional disputes, to play down episodes like East Timor and the Muslim rebellions in the southern Philippines and to underline common political and economic interests. Above all, the elder and younger sultans feared being cast adrift and, no doubt, overtures of friendliness shown to them at a meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Hussein Onn in St Paul's Cathedral at last summer's Jubilee celebrations seemed the turning of a new page. Even Australia, in the person of former Australian prime minister Gough Whitlam, said in Jakarta last week that it welcomed Indonesia's recent announcement of support for Brunei's independence.

Whether these assurances will materialise into more formal bonds is not clear, but the possibility of Brunei joining the Federation of Malaysia eventually is interesting to contemplate. The chance to do so first arose in 1963 but the then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Sir Omar failed to reach agreement.

Problems of a power vacuum

By K. Das

Kuala Lumpur: The news of independence for Brunei by 1983 — 20 years after it *could* have been — was received in Kuala Lumpur without any flag-waving. Indeed, there was no immediate official reaction.

While there was reluctance to talk about the future of Brunei, it was clear that the prospect of its independence was receiving serious attention in Kuala Lumpur. The most important single worry was the security of the Sultanate, now in the hands of a British-officered Gurkha battalion and the Royal Brunei Malay Regiment.

Observers believe that at the end of 1983 local regiments must meet the needs of security not so much from external as from internal threats. Communist insurgents in Sarawak, hemmed in by Malaysian and Indonesian troops, would find Brunei a convenient sanc-



Sunset salute: High Commissioner James Davidson.

tuary if its defence capacity were reduced. Brunei must enlarge its army and police units and train them rapidly. The question (still unanswered) in Kuala Lumpur is whether Brunei should receive the benefit of Malaysia's vast experience in controlling terrorism.

The popular theory that the elder Sultan, who abdicated in favour of his son 10 years ago, pulled out of the talks leading to membership in the Malaysian federation 15 years ago in a fit of pique, is dismissed here as too fanciful. The story was that he wanted to be the first elected King of Malaysia and that the then Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, turned him down.

A basic fact is that the Sultan in 1963 rejected the financial arrangements of-

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ferred by Kuala Lumpur, which were similar to those offered to Sabah and Sarawak. Brunei Town (as the capital was then known) objected to putting the State's oil revenue in Kuala Lumpur's hands in exchange for development aid. As it turned out, the growth of oil and gas revenue in the small Sultanate has increased so fast that its total external reserves today almost equal those of the Federation as a whole, and stand around B\$6 billion (US\$2.542 billion).

Veteran negotiators in Kuala Lumpur feel that, as with Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, a big obstacle to Brunei entering Malaysia will be the long-serving British civil servants as well as the oilmen now enjoying life in a colony without the encumbrance of governing. The present Sultan's father, who, in the words of the British High Commission's background paper issued in Kuala Lumpur, "was Chief Adviser from 1967 until his resignation in 1974, still dominates the political scene," still relies upon British advisers.

The younger Sultan and his father, however, are not thought of as men easily swayed either by advisers or adversaries. In terms of serving as a royal house, the abdication of the elder Sultan is seen as a clever move, both in terms of training the younger Sultan, finding time to reduce intrigue within the palace and building up a political party as an alternative to the former Party Rakyat Brunei, which inspired an abortive but bloody revolution in 1962.

Despite the damaged relations between Kuala Lumpur and Bandar Seri Begawan over the past decade or so, with allegations that Kuala Lumpur helped the detained rebels of 1962 escape from Brunei, and Brunei's claim to parts of Sarawak (the district of Limbang) rejected in terms that were seen as harsh, the present Government in Kuala Lumpur appears optimistic that "Brunei can exist peacefully as an independent state in Southeast Asia." With Malaysia's assurance that there will be no question of interference in the internal affairs of Brunei, and Prime Minister Datuk Hussein Onn's position that the future of Brunei is up to the people of Brunei, the way seems open for Brunei to move into Asean without any trouble. The way into Malaysia may take longer.

Kuala Lumpur is said to be prepared to lend a hand with security, if asked, without being too insistent that the British protectorate should become a Malaysian state, because whatever the past quarrels have been, Kuala Lumpur is more concerned about its own security being destabilised by the presence of a weak state inside its land mass than by any thought of the millions of dollars in oil that the additional state might bring for a few years more. ■