

After 96 years of British rule, Brunei to be independent

by
Paul Wedel

SINGAPORE (UPI) — The tiny sultanate of Brunei on the South China Sea will declare its independence on January 1, after 96 years of British rule.

The world's newest independent country will be one of the richest, with a per capita income of more than US\$22,000 per year from gas and oil revenues.

Brunei covers only 2,226 square miles on the north coast of the island of Borneo.

But when 36-year-old Sultan Sir Muda Hassanah Bolkiah pilots his helicopter, equipped with white leather upholstery and gold fittings, he flies over petroleum reserves expected to last well into the next century. "It is like a Middle East oil sheikhdom transplanted to the tropics," said an expatriate working with the Brunei government.

Joint venture

More than 60 million barrels of oil and 5 million tons of natural gas are sold each year for the benefit of a population of only 205,000 people.

The petroleum is produced by a joint venture between the Brunei government and the Royal Dutch Shell Company. It has allowed the government to operate without personal income tax and to provide extensive welfare benefits, including interest-free home and car loans for civil servants.

Residents call it the "Shell-fare state."

Economic experts estimated Brunei's 1983 income at US\$2.8 billion against budgeted expenditures of US\$1 billion. Brunei has about US\$13 billion in its foreign currency reserves.

Developing

Despite its wealth, Brunei is still very much a developing country.

Efforts to broaden the economy with industry or to achieve self-sufficiency in rice and vegetable oil have shown little progress.

Much of the country is dense tropical forest accessible only by boat or long treks

through the jungle. A variety of tribes live in communal "long houses."

In the capital of Bandar Seri Bagawan (City of the Beautiful River), nearly 30,000 people live in more modern homes built on stilts above the Brunei River. Only a thicket of television aerials and lines of Mercedes Benz automobiles parked on the shore show their wealth.

Soccer stadium

The advent of independence has brought a rush of new building to the capital, a 50,000-seat soccer stadium, new hotels, office buildings and a stunning palace for the Sultan's family that costs an estimated US\$250 million.

This vast wealth, with such a small population to defend it, is one cause of insecurity in Brunei.

A British battalion of Gurkhas will remain after independence on terms that diplomatic sources say are deliberately left vague.

"It could be embarrassing to the Sultan or to the British to have it all spelled out," said one Western diplomat. "It's better just to have them there and leave potential enemies, internal or external, with the uncertainty of what they might do."

Best weapon

Brunei's own defence force of 4,000 men is still led mainly by British officers. It is provided with the best weapons that Brunei's considerable funds can provide.

Included in the arsenal are six patrol boats equipped with French Exocet missiles, a battery of Britain's advanced anti-aircraft missiles, helicopter gunships and a squadron of 12 Scorpion tanks.

But improved relations with neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia have greatly reduced the threats to Brunei's security. Both nations have invited the sultanate to join them in the five-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Brunei has said it will accept the invitation immediately after independence.