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US Naval Refuelling and Communications

Facility: Diego Garcia

Background Note

In August 1968 Ministers approved in principle a United States proposal to establish a small naval refuelling and communications facility consisting of a dredged anchorage for ships, oil storage, wireless communications and an air strip on Diego Garcia atoll in the Chagos Archipelago (part of British Indian Ocean Territory /BIOT/). (Secretary of State's Minute of 25 July 1968, which was subsequently agreed.)

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2. US Congressional hearings about the proposed facility began (in secret session) on 30 June. The initial reaction of the House Armed Services Committee is reported to have been favourable but final Congressional approval may not be forthcoming until the late summer or autumn. The US Administration hope that their proposals for Diego Garcia will remain secret until that time.

3. The Americans have, however, agreed that the Mauritian and Indian Governments may be informed in strict secrecy of the proposals this week, and it is thought that a leak from the Mauritians is less likely if the Secretary of State mentions the matter personally to the Mauritian Prime Minister. The Americans are anxious that we should not give too many details to the Indians or Mauritians at this stage as the Congress may change the Administration's detailed proposals and Congressmen will react strongly if they think that the

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Administration is taking their approval for granted.

4. Resettlement of Population

If they decide to go ahead with their facility, the Americans will wish the contract labourers from the Seychelles and Mauritian presently employed on the copra plantations on Diego Garcia to be resettled elsewhere. Ministers decided in May (Secretary of State's Minute of 21 April 1969 to the Prime Minister which was subsequently agreed) that the least unsatisfactory solution to this problem would be to return to Mauritius and the Seychelles all the workers from Diego Garcia and the two other inhabited islands of the Chagos Archipelago, Peros Banhos and Salomon. A special problem is presented by the fact that some of the contract labourers of Mauritian origin have lived on the islands for one or two generations and, although this should not be admitted to the Mauritian Prime Minister) are dual citizens of Mauritius and the UK and Colonies. Ministers further decided that as soon as the American plans were firm we should enter into talks with the Mauritians about the resettlement of their citizens in Mauritius. All we can do at this stage is to assure Sir Beewoosagur Ramgoolam that we are ready to hold such talks as soon as we have the necessary details of what Congress has approved. In practice this means that talks might take place sometime towards the end of this year.

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