

India's proposed Assumption Island deal drifts

Not convinced: Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Seychelles President Danny Faure in New Delhi earlier this year. PTI

Nearly two weeks after an official announcement by Seychelles President Danny Faure cancelling the agreement with India for the development of Assumption Island in the Indian Ocean, the government has refused to respond to the move, with Defence sources saying they are yet to be informed of the decision.

"We have seen the reports. We are awaiting further details," an official told *The Hindu* on Saturday referring to a press conference by Mr. Faure on June 4 when he announced that the "Assumption project will not move forward".

"In next year's budget, we will put funds for us to build a coast guard facility on Assumption ourselves. It is important for us to ensure that we have a military post in this area," Mr. Faure told journalists in Victoria, according to the Seychelles News Agency.

Mr. Faure made it clear that he would have no further discussions on the subject with Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visited India on June 25 and 26, and that he was not going to table it in the Seychelles National Assembly for ratification. The External Affairs Ministry refused to comment on the issue despite several requests.

Security setback

The decision by the Seychelles President to drop the deal in the face of protests over a perceived loss of sovereignty is a blow to the government's "SAGAR" (Security and Growth for All in the Region) programme, announced by Mr. Modi during a visit to Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) countries in March 2015.

It also comes amid India's troubles with another IOR country, the Maldives, where the government has demanded that India withdraw two helicopters, pilots and personnel from its atolls that had been sent there to help with maritime patrols.

Discussions regarding development of Assumption Island began in 2003, but were formalised in 2015 during Mr. Modi's visit.

The deal was to include a 20-year access to the base, as well as permission to station some military personnel on ground with facilities on the island funded by India, owned by the Seychelles and jointly managed by both sides. In a reply in Parliament, the Ministry said that the agreement was "renegotiated" at the request of the Government of Seychelles in January to help push the deal through the National Assembly.

Attempts futile

However, despite two visits by the Foreign Secretary (in January by then Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar and in May by Vijay Gokhale), as well as discussions during two meetings between Mr. Modi and Mr. Faure on the sidelines of the Solar Summit in Delhi and the Commonwealth Summit in London, Victoria and New Delhi appear to have been unable to save the deal.

In an attempt to engage with the Opposition in the Seychelles that had led protests against the agreement, India had raised the issue with Leader of the Opposition Wavel Ramkalawan, who was

a special guest at the PIO Parliamentary Conference this year, which was addressed by the Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and had met President Ram Nath Kovind.

However, he rebuffed the Indian request, saying during a speech in New Delhi that “Seychelles would never accept any naval base of any country, be it the U.S. or India or any other”. Naval officials pointed out that India’s defence maritime cooperation with the Seychelles is long-standing and some of the upgrade work on Assumption Island was already under way. According to a source, India has resurfaced the old airstrip on the island as part of the infrastructure development project worth over \$500 million. The cancellation of the agreement in a strategically important island could have far-reaching implications, said a government analyst, who preferred not to be named.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com