

# Talks Near on Destiny of 25 Pacific Isles

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For centuries, Christmas Island lay unobtrusively 1,200 miles south of Hawaii, notable as the largest atoll in the Pacific and as a fuel stop for island-hopping American warplanes during World War II. In 1957 and 1958 the island became the focus of world attention when Britain exploded hydrogen bombs off its shores. It re-emerged to public view in 1962 when the United States conducted atomic explosions in the vicinity.

In the 15 years since then: silence.

But now, British-controlled Christmas Island appears destined to be in the news again, along with 24 smaller Pacific islands. The ownership of all is in dispute, and that dispute is headed for settlement after more than a century, an American State Department official says.

EIGHTEEN OF the islands, including Christmas, are claimed jointly by Britain and the United States, and seven by New Zealand and the United States. A showdown over ownership is imminent because Britain is planning to let Christmas and other islands in the area vote on independence by early next year.

In London, Garth Pettitt, assistant head of the Pacific Dependent Territories Department in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reports that 60-square-mile Christmas Island is inhabited by 1,000 people today, mainly Gilbert Islanders. The atoll, he says, has two airfields, produces coconuts (800 tons expected this year), houses a Japanese satellite tracking station and is engaged in the experimental cultivation of brine shrimp in its large lagoon.

Pettitt says that if the islanders vote for independence, "We're prepared to grant it."

In Washington, William Gallagher, the State Department's country officer for New Zealand and Pacific island affairs, comments: "Neither we nor the British want to see any of these island groups pass into independence with any dispute to claims to their territory."

He says the United States will open negotiations with Britain shortly, and "in the next six months we hope to have resolved the dispute."

# U.S. to Relinquish Its Claims to 25 Islands in Pacific

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NEW YORK — The United States intends to transfer its claims to 25 islands in the south-central Pacific to the new nations in that area, State Department officials say.

Most of these islands, many uninhabited and others uninhabitable because they lack fresh water and vegetation, will go to what used to be the British colonies of the Ellice Islands and the Gilbert Islands. The Ellice Islands became the independent nation of Tuvalu in September 1978 and the Gilbert Islands became Kiribati in July 1979.

The United States will give 14 islands in the Phoenix and Line Islands groups to Kiribati and four other islands to Tuvalu.

In 1939, the United States resolved conflicting claims with Britain over Canton Island and the Enderbury Islands, in the Phoenix group, by agreeing on a joint administration of the islands. In the 1960s, Britain agreed to allow the United States to administer Canton Island exclusively so that the Defense Department could install a missile tracking station, which was closed in 1979.

IN RECENT YEARS, according to the officials, Britain and New Zealand had proposed to the United States reaching a permanent settlement of the long-disputed claims over the remote islands. Britain, a State Department official said, had a distinct advantage in its claims because it administered the 14 Gilbert Islands and the four Ellice Islands together as a British colony until they were separated in 1975.

Treaties to settle conflicting claims over the islands while protecting American military and economic interests have been drawn up, with two of them already signed but not yet ratified, said William Bodde, the director for Pacific Island Affairs in the State Department.

In addition to the islands going to Kiribati and Tuvalu, the United States is giving up its claims to some islands that have been administered by New Zealand. A treaty has been initialed renouncing four northern atolls in the Cook Islands and a self-governing overseas territory of New Zealand, and negotiations are under way with New Zealand to give up the three atolls of the Tokelau group.

All the treaties will guarantee continued American access to existing military structures on the islands, some of which were used as bases against Japan in World War II. They also assure the United States of fair treatment in applications for licenses to fish the areas.

THE NEW NATIONS are bound under the treaties to consult with the United States, which will have veto powers, if a third country requests use of an island for military purposes, or if the United States wants, for any reason, to return there.

The treaties were written, Bodde said, only after identifying the remaining American interests on the islands. These include, the State Department said, general and strategic security for the United States and fisheries that mainly produce tuna. The strength of the American claims on the islands was also weighed to indicate whether they would be strong enough to hold up in an international court.

The United States originally claimed 58 islands, including those to be given away, under a congressional act passed on Aug. 18, 1856, known as the "Guano Act." Guano is the accumulated excrement and remains of birds, bats or seals. In the latter part of the 19th century many of the islands' guano deposits were mined by companies with the product being shipped to the United States for use in phosphate fertilizers.

Many American experts on the South Seas consider the 121-year-old Guano Act a "high-handed" claim that the United States never tried to enforce. Since 1856, other nations have also claimed the islands.

The 1865 act laid claim to all guano-producing islands that were discovered by citizens of the United States and did not belong to other countries. Some of the islands that were claimed never existed. Others had two or more names.

Harlan Lee, another State Department official, noted that guano could see a resurgence as a commodity because of renewed interest in the use of natural fertilizers in the United States.