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June 11, 2000

SMALL ISLANDS, BIG TROUBLE

Looking for Paradise? Keep Looking

By BARBARA CROSSETTE

UNITED NATIONS -- LT. JOE CABLE and Bloody Mary knew the score. Not even a South Pacific paradise like the fictional one created by Rodgers and Hammerstein is spared the ugly things in life like racial intolerance and war.

Coups have now shaken Fiji and the Solomon Islands, catapulting those small ocean nations into the world's attention momentarily and exposing ethnic tensions and economic rivalries festering under the sun, somehow out of place in such a perfect setting.

Or are they?

Small island nations, truth to tell, often have very big problems. They are almost inevitably short of resources on land, and even when that is not so there is usually just one commodity to sell, putting them at the mercy of volatile global markets.

All have the sea, of course, but their traditional fishing waters are invaded by the trawlers of industrialized countries.

And those sleepy lagoons on the tourist brochures are rarely photographed after a punishing typhoon has torn down the palm trees and swept small villages and outriggers into the angry sea. In the mid-1980s, development in the Solomons was set back a decade by just one storm.

Sometimes the catastrophes are almost beyond imagining. Think of those people moved away from Pacific atolls that became bulls'-eyes for atomic tests in the heyday of the nuclear age. Or of people now forced to watch generations of family graves being claimed by waves that lap higher up the beach each year because of global warming, a phenomenon only big nations have the power to



The Associated Press

Some Islands are volcanic as well as storm-prone. Montserrat lies half-buried in ash after a 1996 eruption.

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reverse.

In the Indian Ocean nation of Maldives, for those vacationers who take time to look, the biggest construction projects on view near the capital, Malé, are the piles of giant concrete jacks that form a seawall, the last defense against annihilation if seas continue to rise.

Sometimes, though, the problem is not too much water but too little. Some of the most sought-after tourist islands are popular precisely because they don't get enough rain. The Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid addresses the reader bluntly to make the point in "A Small Place" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988):

"Since you are a tourist, the thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out in a place that suffers constantly from drought, and so has to watch carefully every drop of fresh water used (while at the same time surrounded by a sea and an ocean -- the Caribbean Sea on one side, the Atlantic Ocean on the other), must never cross your mind."

History, too, has been unkind. Islands were snapped up in a day by colonial powers, whose plantation owners and merchants then rearranged the population. They shipped workers, or slaves, from one part of the world to another and, in the process, set in train the ethnic competitions that would one day blow up in places like Fiji -- or Trinidad, where native people had to move over and share space with not only indentured workers from India but also African slaves.

THE people of Sri Lanka, the glorious Serendip of antiquity, blame Britain for favoring Tamils over Sinhalese a century ago, setting the scene for the lethal ethnic divisions now tearing apart one of the most beautiful islands on earth.

Colonial powers sometimes stick around and make trouble for a long time, say diplomats from the Comoro Islands. They blame France for fostering divisions in the Indian Ocean archipelago that together should form a nation. One island, Anjouan, left the group in 1997 and another, Grand Comore, flirted with secession in 1999. And although the United States had no historical relationship with Grenada, American troops stormed ashore in 1983 after the Grenadans were judged to have fallen too deeply into the orbit of Cuba.

Island nations have searched for ways to enhance their clout, collectively. Last fall, they merited a special General Assembly session at the United Nations to air their fears. An "environmental vulnerability index" is in the works, intended to give them a recognizable way to demonstrate their frailty.

Federations are usually not an answer to their weakness, since distances between islands are great and cultures can differ irreconcilably when they are separated by water.

Think of the insular jealousies and rivalries that scuttled the dream of forming a Federation of the West Indies among the English-speaking Caribbean islands when they were emerging from Britain's colonialism three decades ago. Or of the example of Indonesia -- 13,000 islands put together by Dutch colonialists and forced to stay together by two Indonesian strongmen, Sukarno and Suharto. When hapless Sulawesi and Sumatra tried to break free half a century ago, they were bombed into submission not by the Dutch but by the new Indonesian government. Centrifugal forces persist in Indonesia to this day.

And then there is Singapore, arguably the most successful of small -- extremely small -- island nations, but one with considerable potential for trouble, since its population is divided among the majority Chinese population and strong Malay and Tamil minorities.

Singapore, under its founder, Lee Kuan Yew, put considerable energy into

making sure nothing awful could possibly happen -- and then wove a philosophy around it. Political and ethnic dissent were systematically suppressed in the name of unity.

Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations and the chairman of a forum of small nations represented there, uses appropriately nautical terms to explain why little nations can't afford the luxury of unrest.

"I think of it as crossing an ocean in a canoe or on an aircraft carrier," he said. The people on the aircraft carrier, he said, can jump around, even play football and the boat doesn't rock. In a canoe, all the passengers have to paddle in unison facing the same direction or there will be disaster.

"The key point," he said, "is that in a small state your margin for error is smaller."

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