

INDIA TO THE RESCUE

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 juggernaut

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WARNING: THIS IS NOT A WORK OF FICTION!

India has a large armed force but it mostly guards our borders. You'll hear about our military operations fighting Pakistan and China in the north but our other missions tend to be rare and not spoken of.

This is the story of the time when the island country of the Maldives, which lies in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka, was attacked in the dead of night. India flew to its rescue in one of the most daring operations in our history – Operation Cactus. It was one of our country's quickest, boldest and most successful missions!

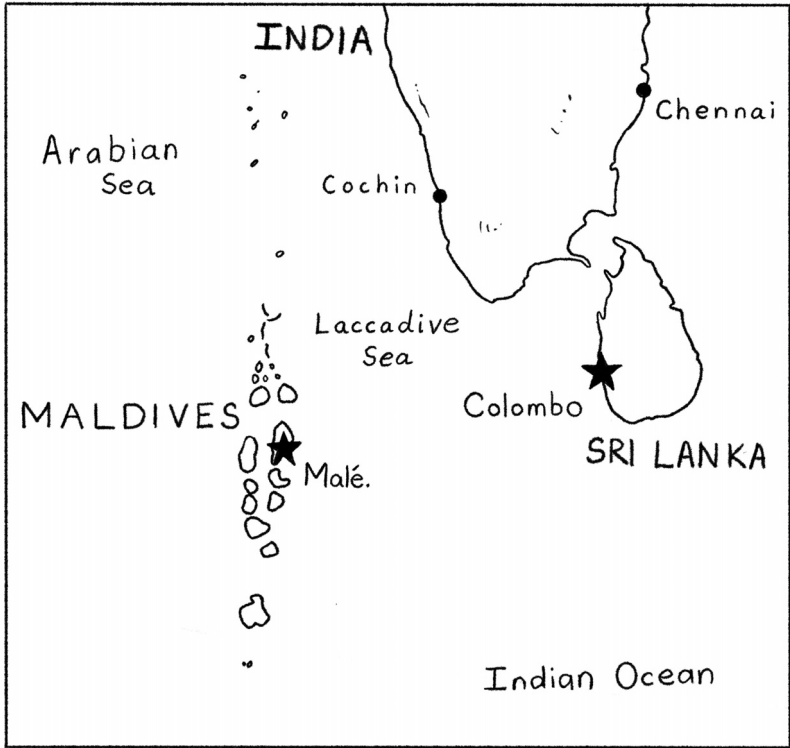
This account was originally written by Sushant Singh, who researched the story and interviewed many of the characters in it. I've adapted it, adding a few extra dialogues and dramatizing some scenes. But be warned – every detail in this book is real!

Shruthi Rao

HOW TO TAKE OVER A COUNTRY IN 10 SIMPLE STEPS

1. Choose your country. The smaller and more peace-loving it is, the better.
2. Get a partner in crime. Are they: Familiar with the country? Check. Hungry for power? Check. Rolling in money? You've hit the jackpot!
3. Build your army. Use the money (from point 2) to buy arms and ammunition and pay mercenaries (soldiers for hire).
4. Plan the takeover down to the smallest detail: speed and secrecy is of the essence.
5. Attack at night or dawn when defences are low.
6. Seize the country's transport and communication networks. Close all roads, rail links, ports and airports. Take over television, radio, telephones, cell towers and the media.
7. Destroy the military and capture their arsenal.
8. Arrest political and military leaders.
9. Create a ruckus on the streets to cow down residents.
10. Announce that you're the new leader.

Congratulations! You're now the head of a country.



WHERE IS THE MALDIVES?

The Maldives is an archipelago made up of 1,200 tiny islands. You can walk around the tiniest one in under five minutes. The island of Malé is just twice the size of Bangalore's Lalbagh, or a little more than five times the size of Delhi's Lodi Gardens!

The Maldivian islands are in the shape of a garland, which is probably where it got its name from: mala (garland) + dweepa (island).

MALÉ UNDER ATTACK



MALÉ, MALDIVES

3 November 1988

It was just before dawn. All was quiet in Malé, the capital city of the Maldives. But scary things were afoot.

In the dark, a large ship had quietly sailed close to the coast. Two speedboats left the ship, whizzed through the waters and landed on the jetty. Moments later, dozens of men sprang out of the boats, machine guns in their hands.

The shadowy figures swept through the city. They headed towards government buildings and took their positions.

And then it began.

The rat-tat-tat of machine guns and the boom of grenades shattered the silence of the dawn. Malé was under attack.

At the presidential palace, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom woke up with a jolt. In no time, his security team whisked him out of the palace and to a safe house. Only the most trusted people knew of its location. The President was safe – for now.

The attackers captured the television and radio stations. They cut off the water and electricity supplies to the city.

They opened fire on the headquarters of the National Security Service (NSS), the organization responsible for maintaining the peace and security of the country. The soldiers there fought back bravely but could not overpower the attackers. The NSS soldiers were

Malé Under Attack

now stuck inside the building, surrounded by the attackers.

The Maldivians were outnumbered and outclassed. The country was in desperate need of help.

SOS! SOS!



DOES A COUNTRY REALLY NEED A MILITARY?

As long as you have unsteady relationships with your neighbours, a military is necessary for any country to protect itself. Large countries spend tonnes of money on a strong defence force.

On the other hand, many small countries, especially island nations that mind their own business, get along just fine without a military. But what if other busybodies don't let them live in peace? Valid question. Some of these small countries have pacts and protection agreements with larger countries for just this kind of scenario.

The Maldives' NSS at the time that our story unfolds was a small organization that looked after the safety and security of the people. It was made up of the local police, a two-plane air force, coastguards and so on. But after the 1988 attack, the Maldives built up its defences and now the better-equipped Maldives National Defence Force protects the country.

NEW DELHI

6 a.m.

Arun Banerjee, the Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives, was sleeping comfortably wrapped up in a quilt. He was enjoying a short break in New Delhi.

But the insistent ring of the telephone cut through his sleep. Who could it be at this hour?

Arun sat up groggily and reached for the phone.

‘Hello?’

The call was from his secretary in Malé. ‘Mr Banerjee!’ he said. ‘Malé is under attack!’



‘What!’ Arun was wide awake now. He listened, stunned, as the secretary filled him in on all the details.

‘The Maldives needs help, Mr Banerjee. President Gayoom has sent out SOS messages to India, Pakistan, Malaysia, even the UK and US. Can India help?’

India could. As the largest country in South Asia, India wanted to establish itself as a regional superpower. It was already active in operations with Sri Lanka.

Arun hung up and hurriedly placed a call to India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). They were already neck-deep in action. They’d heard the news and directed the Indian Air Force (IAF) to prepare for a mission to the Maldives. The IAF chiefs had sent orders for aircraft and officers to be on standby and wait for further instructions.

The MEA briefed the Prime Minister of

India, Rajiv Gandhi, who called for an urgent high-level meeting.



WHAT WAS ARUN'S JOB?

Countries have set-ups called foreign ministries, with officials whose job is to work with foreign officials of other countries. That's how countries conduct business and discussions with each other.

India's foreign ministry (also called the Ministry of External Affairs, or MEA) sent Arun to live and work in the Maldives and be India's representative there.

Usually, people like Arun are called ambassadors and they work in embassies. But India's ambassadors to the Commonwealth countries (countries that were once part of the British empire) are called high commissioners. That was what Arun was, and the office he worked at was known as the Indian High Commission.