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U. S. bids to acquire northern Marianas

SAIPAN, U. S. Pacific Trust Territories, July 4 [Reuters]

—The United States is on the way to making its first major territorial acquisition since 1916 when the Virgin Islands were bought from Denmark.

In negotiations just concluded, a substantial agreement was reached on a plan to bring the Northern Mariana Islands, in the Western Pacific, into a commonwealth relationship with the U. S.

In return for offering the islanders American citizenship, the U. S. will gain important new locations for military facilities.

Physically, the new territory will not amount to much—just 14 tiny islands with a land area of 183 square miles and a population of only 13,381. That population is less than a quarter of the U. S. Virgin Islands, and less than half of American Samoa, now the smallest U. S. territory.

THE U. S. entered the talks after more than 12 years of indications that the people of the area wanted a closer and more permanent relationship.

A ticklish diplomatic problem was posed, since the Marianas are an integral part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, commonly known as Micronesia, which has been administered by the U. S. since 1947 under a United Nations agreement.

Talks aimed at ending the

trusteeship are also under way with the other five districts that make up the territory.

The people of the Carolina and Marshall Islands, quite clearly do not want to be a permanent part of the American political family. But last year, American Ambassador Franklin Hayden Williams, who represents President Nixon in the talks, bowed to the insistence of the Marianas leaders and agreed to separate negotiations.

DESPITE MOUNTING criticism of this course, most recently from a visiting United Nations mission that toured Micronesia in February, the talks proceeded.

The two sides have now agreed that the Marianas will become a commonwealth similar in status to Puerto Rico, but with some notable differences.

Taking note of fears among the Chamorros natives that outside speculators will buy up their choicest property the U. S. agreed to local legislation prohibiting sale of land to anyone not of Northern Marianas ancestry.

And while American citizenship will be offered, some provision will also be made to accommodate those who might not wish it. This means there will be two categories, most likely U. S. citizens and U. S. nationals.