

Marianas soon to knock for admittance

U.S. flag to fly over new postwar land?

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The U.S. is well on the way to becoming the only major country in the world to acquire new sovereign territory since World War II — the 14 Pacific islands called the Marianas.

On one of the islands, Tinian, the U.S. Air Force plans to build a major new air base.

If current plans succeed, the Marianas also would become the first territory acquired by the U.S. since it purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917.

The plans are for the Marianas to become a United States commonwealth territory, at which time the 13,000 inhabitants of the islands would become U.S. citizens. This would be the same status as Puerto Rico today.

Currently the Marianas are a United Nations strategic trust administered by the United States. The change could come in a year or so.

Their future will be one subject of a meeting of the Political Status Commission of the Marianas, the fourth in a series begun two years ago, which is to meet on the island of Saipan on May 15.

American officials will discuss with representatives of the District Legislature of the Marianas and other island representatives the steps to be taken: first a plebiscite, then application to the UN Security Council, then approval by the U.S. Congress.

The Marianas would then draft their own internal constitution, something like that of Puerto Rico.

Air-base conversion

The other subject to be discussed is the U.S. Air Force's plans to convert the northern two-thirds of the island of Tinian into an air base.

There are on the island four parallel 8,500-foot runways long abandoned by the Air Force, from which B-29's — including one that carried the atomic bomb to Hiroshima — operated against Japan during World War II.

Now the Air Force wants to buy the land on which the runways are laid, which it has leased since 1946, and to develop a new base to supplement Guam.

No request for funds

Although outside the trust territory, Guam, which the United States took from Spain after the Spanish-American war, is geographically part of the Marianas. With a naval base at one end and an Air Force base at the other, and a population of 90,000 in between, Guam is getting crowded.

Tinian, with a population of only 800, would solve that problem.

The project is some years from realization, however, according to Pentagon officials. No request has yet been made to Congress for funds.

Fortunately for the Air Force there seems to be no significant opposition in the Marianas to the air-base project even though it would require resettling some farmers from one end of the island to the other. A ranch operated by former American Seabee Ken Jones, one of the island's few economic resources, would probably remain intact.

The air base presumably would prove an economic asset to the people of Tinian as well as to those of the larger neighboring islands of Rota (population 1,000) and Saipan (population more than 11,000). Beyond agriculture, their local assets are few. In recent years they have been benefiting from an overflow of Japanese tourists who have adopted Guam as a honeymoon resort.

Different path

By seeking U.S. commonwealth status, the Mariana Islanders are traveling a political path somewhat

different from that chosen by the rest of the Micronesian islanders numbering about 100,000. This larger group, composed of the Marshalls and the Carolines, has been conducting its own series of meetings with American officials in pursuit of a status described as "free association."

Paralleling the status that Britain has granted some of the islands of the Caribbean, "free association" would make them internally independent while their foreign affairs and defense would be handled by the United States. They would be citizens of Micronesia and could at some future

time, if they wish, acquire full independence. Whether they would also acquire a special status as "United States nationals," as in the case of Samoans, is one of the subjects under debate.

One of the Micronesian Islands, Kwajalein in the Marshalls, is an important U.S. base used for testing antiballistic-missile systems. There is also a project of undefined nature to establish a military base on Palau, the westernmost island in the Micronesian group.

Some experts who have lived in the Marianas believe that the Marianans wish to separate from the other

Micronesians and to draw closer to the United States can be traced to their tragic history,

Colonized first by the Spanish, they have known German and Japanese rule before the American landings of World War II in which almost everything on the island including most of its vegetation, was destroyed.

Under the Spanish, a series of political risings led to harsh reprisals in the course of which the islanders were decimated and many were exiled to Guam.