

ONLY QUESTION OF PUBLIC LANDS NEEDS IRONING OUT

Marianas May Be 2d U.S. Commonwealth

By DICK WILLIAMS

SAIPAN, Mariana Islands (UPI) — A question of jurisdiction over public lands seems to be the only issue keeping the Northern Mariana Islands from becoming the second commonwealth of the United States.

The first, of course, is the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, and now talks aimed at getting the same status are under way in Saipan, capital of the Northern Marianas and a Pacific trust territory.

Ambassador Franklin H. Williams is President Nixon's personal envoy at the talks with the Marianas Status Committee headed by Saipan Congressman Edward Pangillman.

The Northern Marianas are a chain of islands running from Guam at the extreme southern end, which is a separate entity, to the island of Maug, only 300 miles from Japan.

Williams and Pangillman say they are hopeful that a draft covenant will result from the current talks, possibly by the end of June. Sources close to the talks say a draft already exists and only the question of public lands ownership remains to be settled.

Historically, public lands have been in the domain of the American federal government but the Saipan delegation con-

tends the local government must have complete jurisdiction over all public lands.

Last year, the United States said it would require Tinian island for the military and relocate the 600 people in its only village. The announcement caused a furor in Tinian, Saipan and even Guam, 113 miles to the south.

Williams backtracked, saying the picturesque village of San Jose would not be moved after all. It is believed here that the United States has now asked for two-thirds of the island for a Joint Air Force-Navy military bastion.

It was from Tinian that the "Enola Gay" took off from in 1945 to drop the first atomic bomb on Japan, setting the stage for the end of World War II. Now the people subsist generally off the land and sea.

Rota, another island, has a population of about 3,000 and is only about 40 miles from Guam. It is the agricultural heart of the Mariana chain and most of its farmers have contracts with the U.S. military in Guam to provide fresh produce for commissaries and mess halls.

The island of Pagan has about 50 inhabitants. It is on the same parallel with Hawaii and has the same climate. Of volcanic origin, Pagan has black sand beaches and boasts

natural hot springs. There is a 3,000-foot aircraft runway but no docking facilities.

Life on Saipan is becoming more sophisticated. Three tourist hotels operate at 85 per cent occupancy year around with Japanese tourists and the island's 13,000 people have television, nightclubs and movie houses.

From Pagan to Guam, 350 miles south, the people speak the same language, Chamorro; they are of the same religion, Catholic; they have the same customs.

Guam is close, but residents of the trust territory may not enter Guam for the purpose of employment — nor may Guamanians, who are Americans, enter the trust territory. For all intents and purposes, the U.S. Immigration Service considers Marianas residents aliens, and the Marianas consider Americans to be aliens.

A change in this situation, long awaited by people of both sides, is expected to come once the Northern Marianas become a commonwealth.

After the Spanish-American war in 1898, Spain ceded Guam, then the capital of the Marianas, to the United States but gave the other islands to Germany.