

## Operation Cactus

Operation Cactus was an Indian military operation carried out during the 1988 Maldives coup d'état attempt.

During this operation, the Indian Army thwarted an attempt by a group of Maldivians led by businessman Abdullah Luthufi to depose the government of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Abdullah Luthufi was assisted in his coup attempt by armed mercenaries of the Tamil secessionist organisation from Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE)

This article will give details about Operation Cactus within the context of the IAS Exam.

### Background of Operation Cactus

There have been two coups (In 1980 and 1983) against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's government, but they were not considered serious enough. The 1988 coup attempt however, was serious enough to alarm the international community.

Amount 80 PLOTE mercenaries landed in capital Malé on the dawn of 3 November 1988 aboard a hijacked Sri Lankan freighter. They quickly took over key infrastructures such as airports, ports, television and radio stations.

The mercenaries then made their way towards the Presidential Palace but before they could seize president Gayoom, he was escorted by the Maldivan National Security Advisor of the Defense Minister's Home form where he was escorted to a safe house.

On failing to secure the President, the mercenaries resorted to taking hostages among key government ministers. President Gayoom requested military intervention from nearby countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Singapore, but they all refused help citing lack of military capabilities. The United States did agree but said it would take 2-3 days to reach Maldives.

President Gayoom contacted the United Kingdom, whose Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advice to ask India for help as the UK naval forces were too far away to provide any meaningful assistance. He promptly did so and India accepted his request swiftly. Following an emergency meeting in New Delhi, India was ready to carry out its operation.

## Events during Operation Cactus

Operation Cactus began on 3 November 1988, when an Ilyushin-76 transport aircraft airlifted a detachment of 50th Independent Parachute Brigade 6th Battalion of the Parachute Regiment and the 17th Parachute Field Regiment. Under the command of Brigadier Frukhsara. The detachments flew from Agra to Malé, landing at the Malé International Airport on Hulhule Island.

The Indian paratroopers immediately secured the airfield, crossed over to Malé in boats. They engaged the PLOTE mercenaries, where in a lengthy firefight, they secured the capital.

Following the end of the fighting, about 19 people were killed, mostly mercenaries and two hostages killed by them. Indian Navy Frigates intercepted the hijacked freighter that brought in the mercenary force off the Sri Lankan Coast. The immediate response by the Indian military and pinpoint accuracy of the intelligence received about the coup helped in successfully averting a political crisis in the Indian Ocean

## Aftermath and Reaction to Operation Cactus

India received praise for its intervention. United States President Ronald Reagan expressed his appreciation for India's action, calling it "an immense contribution to regional security". Yet there was some disquiet among India's neighbours in South Asia

India extradited some of the mercenaries captured from the freighter in July 1989 to stand trial in the Maldives. Although they were all handed death sentences, President Gayoom commuted to life imprisonment under Indian pressure

The 1988 coup was funded and headed by Maldivian businessman Abdulla Luthufi from his base in Sri Lanka. Former Maldivian President Ibrahim Nasir also was accused but he denied any involvement in the coup.. In July 1990, Nasir was pardoned by President Gayoom in absentia due to his role in the Maldives Independence struggle.

The operation also strengthened Indo-Maldivian relations as a result of the successful restoration of the Gayoom government.

As per scholars of India's Foreign Policy, India's intervention in the attempted coup became necessary as in the absence of Indian intervention, external powers would have been tempted to intervene or even to establish bases in Maldives, which being in India's backyard would have been detrimental to India's national interest. India, therefore, intervened with "Operation Cactus".

