MALDIVES AIRPORT TO BE EXPANDED WITH CONTROVERSIAL $800M CHINA CONTRACT

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Move likely to annoy India which has been concerned at Chinese encroachment in the strategically located Indian Ocean islands.

The Maldives government has kicked off a controversial $800-million expansion of the country's main airport by a Chinese company, a move likely to irritate giant neighbour India.

President Abdulla Yameen inaugurated construction work in a ceremony on Wednesday night in the capital Male of the politically troubled country.

"The president stated that with the expansion, the airport would become the economic backbone of the Maldives and that this would be the main gateway of modern day development," a government statement said on Thursday.

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Chinese company Beijing Urban Construction Group was awarded the contract during President Xi Jinping's visit to the strategically located Indian Ocean islands in September 2014.

Two years earlier, the Maldives kicked out Indian infrastructure firm GMR which was given the airport under a privatisation deal and cancelled its lucrative contract to run the airport.

The move sparked fury from New Delhi which threatened to cut off aid to the country, amid concerns the upmarket holiday destination was tilting towards India's rival China.

The expansion comes as Yameen is set to arrive in India on Sunday for an official visit, and will meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Maldives government, which says the airport will not be privatised again, has said the expansion is needed to accommodate increasing tourist numbers to the upmarket honeymoon destination.

The expansion means the Airbus A380 will be able to land at the airport which will also be able to handle 7.5 million passengers a year.

It comes despite ongoing political turmoil in the Maldives which has dented its reputation as a peaceful tourist paradise.

Yameen has faced international criticism over the jailing of dissidents and political opponents including former president and now opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed.

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