

SOUTH UIST ROCKET RANGE:

They're lengthening the airstrip at Benbecula, on the northern tip of South Uist in the Hebrides. Not a very big job, in itself - but it's the start of a project which has raised a storm far beyond the shores of the Western Isles. On those remote acres, where the Atlantic is empty of shipping, the Government has decided to build a guided missile range. And the crofters - whose way of life is not so very different from that of their Celtic ancestors - are strongly opposed to the scheme.

The Government says nowhere else will do. Rocket development is a life-and-death matter for every major power; we dare not be left behind in the race; and rockets, by their very nature, must have plenty of room, far more than the biggest artillery range.

So the work goes on. It will bring some advantages to the islanders; employment, new public utilities, etc., and a Scottish bank is in on the ground floor. But the people of South Uist are content with their old ways. Father John Morrison, their spiritual leader, is also the rallying-point for their opposition to the rocket scheme. In his house, plans are discussed to force the Government to hold a public inquiry. Yes, the Government is willing to talk - but not to hold up the work.

At first, the plan involved 200 acres; now it's thirteen hundred, and the crofters fear it will spread farther. Maybe they are right - but at least the Government should tell them exactly where they stand.