Rum tale of a corpse and a missing yachtsman

SHAUN JOHNSON, (A rather frenetic) Saturday News Correspondent in the Seychelles

HE doesn't know it yet, but Anthony Steward interfered with the Seychelles elections. He also gave your correspondent a terrible fright. Let me tell you a little island story.

It was Monday, the day after voting on the main island, Mahe, and the extraordinary news was sinking in that President Albert Rene, after 15 years of self-imposed one-party rule, had won the first round of multi-party elections.

In true Seychelles style, Monday had been declared a national holiday: elections director Andre Sauzier explained that this was "to allow political passions to cool".

In fact, supporters of President Rene's victorious Seychelles People's Progressive Front were not so much cooling off, as tanking up. There were impromptu turkey braais and rum parties on the sides of the island roads; the police and army were fully mobilised and riding round looking mean in jeeps.

The story, for the small knot of foreign correspondents, was whether the rum levels would reach the point whereby clashes between revelling Rene loyalists and disgruntled followers of Sir James Mancham became inevitable. It certainly looked like it.

But then Steward, the madly courageous South African round-the-world-solo yachtsman, intervened.

News arrived that there was an attempt to airlift him from far-off Farquhar island, where he had turned up after so nearly meeting his end on an Indian Ocean atoll. Election fever momentarily forgotten, I rushed to Mahe's little airport where a delapidated small aircraft had just landed.

I approached a very large and swarthy islander. Was there a yachtsman on board with you? "No," he said. Then, calling back over his shoulder as he disappeared into the tropical twilight, he pointed back at the shuddering plane: "But there was a dead body."

Extreme worry about Steward set in. I rushed to peep at the corpse, but it was nowhere to be seen. I collared the Island Development Company pilot. Dave Plows, in a charming Seychelles-British accent, allayed my fears matter-of-factly. Yes, he said, he had been going to fetch our stranded sailor, but then — you know how it is — he had to go to Assumption island because someone had died there overnight. Steward would have to wait.

In spite of his assurances I was mightily relieved later to raise Steward on a scratchy telephone line to Farquhar. He took the news of his delayed rescue in good part.

Then I began to make vigorous attempts to persuade someone to fly me to Farquhar to fetch Steward, and discovered that Johannesburg freneticism is perhaps not the most effective approach in the Seychelles. The pilot, departing, had said he "thought he should be able to pop in to Farquhar on about Monday" — seven days hence.

My impatience baffled the Seychellois. The yachtsman would be fetched in a week's time, they said. What more could I want? I tried the tack that it would be exceptionally good publicity for the islands to dispatch a mercy mission for the stranded sailor, and see him home safely

Yes, said the Seychellois patiently, that is exactly what we intend to do. On Monday.

The rain stopped and the sun came out. People started forgetting about the election excitement and got back down to the business of living in paradise.

Whenever I passed a Seychellois official in the capital, he would smile and say: "Monday".