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Chagos: stolen nation, dark history

Why do we continue to allow our governments to treat people in small countries as either useful or expendable?

Why do we accept specious reasons for the unacceptable?

The High Court issued one of the most damning indictments of a British government. It said the secret expulsion of the Chagos Islanders was wrong. That judgement must be upheld and the people of a group of beautiful, once peaceful islands must be helped to go home and compensated fully and without delay for their suffering. Anything less diminishes the rest of us (John Pilger).¹

The name Diego Garcia sounds more like the name of a person rather than of an island part of the Chagos Archipelago situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean. This 44 square kilometres (17 square miles) atoll has been considered as one of the most valuable pieces of real estate on Earth because of its very important geostrategic location. Probably few have even heard of it. The footprint-shaped atoll lies in the middle of the Indian Ocean, at the tip of a chain of coral islands whose tropical beauty belies a difficult history.

It has changed hands many times since colonisation by the European powers, until it finally became part of the British Empire in 1814. It was administered as a colony of Mauritius for more than a century, hosting a permanent population that mostly worked on coconut plantations. This continued until 1965, when the United Kingdom ("the UK") established a new colony BIOT (British Indian Ocean Territory) which still exists till the present. With political pressure to decolonise its territories and diminishing strength in international relations in the early 1960s, the UK decided to withdraw its longstanding military and political presence from the Indian Ocean. To fill the political and security vacuum, the United States ("the US") decided to fill the void. In 1964, the US and UK governments began discussing the establishment of American defence facilities in the region. They envisaged from the beginning that inhabitants would be transferred or resettled.

Between 1814 and 1965 it was a territory of Mauritius. In 1970, Diego Garcia, out of cyclone range, was leased by the UK to the USA, to develop a joint U.S.-UK air and naval refueling and support station during the cold war. It was also ideal for keeping an eye on the Soviet Union². It became critically important as a refueling base during the 1991 **Persian Gulf War**, and during **Operation Desert Fox** from which long-range cruise missiles were launched against Iraq and then bombing attacks against Afghanistan. It again played a crucial strategic role in the US-UK **war against Iraq**³. Diego Garcia continues to be a crucial political and military point in Asia as it allows the U.S. military to monitor and control the situation in Afghanistan.

Forced Removal of the Indigenous Inhabitants

Although Diego Garcia once had a small native population, the inhabitants, known as the Ilois, or the Chagossians, were forced to relocate (1967-1973) so that the island could be turned into the U.S. military base. Most of the roughly 1,500 displaced Chagossians were agricultural workers and fisherman. Uprooted and robbed of their livelihood, the Chagossians now live in poverty in Mauritius' urban slums over 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles) from their home. Some were also deported to the Seychelles. Currently, they are penniless, poor, and without a home. About 450 islanders forced off Diego Garcia are alive today, and thousands have been born in exile⁴.

Many were forced out of their homes from 1965 to 1973 to accommodate the new U.S. military base. The relocation took place in three stages. Those who were away at the time were not permitted to return to the island. Then the British government cut off the flow of goods and finally the remaining Chagossians were simply forced onto the ships and taken to either Mauritius or the Seychelles. They were granted Mauritian citizenship, but the bad conditions, lack of jobs and discrimination they faced from locals — who taunted them as savages and mocked their accents

— contributed to a profound longing (*sagren*), for their homeland.

Some exiles fell into poverty, alcoholism, gambling and prostitution.

'I had two dogs. They were my companions. During low tides they would catch fish and retrieve them to me on the shore. My heart still hurts when I remember the day they (the British) took the dogs from us to put in the incinerator. We were afraid and convinced that we could have the same fate if we did not obey.' (*Chagossian exile*)

The inhabitants were 'thrown' from their houses without even time to take their clothes, only to run to a waiting boat, and their houses burnt. Documents from the 1960s reveal the appalling treatment of the people who were considered nothing more than a hindrance to the UK-US military plans. They were forced to live in Mauritius and the Seychelles where they have experienced marginalisation, discrimination, and grinding poverty. Chagossians who resettled in Seychelles have never been compensated by the British Government⁵.

Chagos exiles face deportation

Having been evicted by the British from their home, the descendants of the Chagossians now face deportation from the country (UK) that originally exiled them to clear a space for the USA to build its military base. They continue to face immigration problems as they are not British citizens and have petitioned London's High Court for that right. There are 14 British Overseas Territories under the jurisdiction and sovereignty of the UK. They include the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, the Cayman Islands and Montserrat. Citizens from these territories are deemed British by descent, but citizenship cannot be passed on to their children if born out the UK. After a long battle, won in the early 2000s, the Home Office has allowed Chagossians born in exile between 26 April 1969 and 1 January 1983 to become British Citizens. People born 12 months earlier would not qualify for citizenship under this provision. These rights were not extended to the second generation born in exile. The fact that children of Chagossians are born outside their homeland is no fault of their own, but the result of their enforced exile. Nevertheless, they are treated by the UK's Home Office as immigrants like any other. To remain they have to go through a hugely expensive

naturalisation process. The soaring cost of gaining British Citizenship means that many cannot pay and so Chagossian children have been detained or deported after reaching adulthood even though their parents were British citizens.

Many of the exiles, who have been lawful residents for decades, have been treated as if they are in the UK illegally. This has resulted in loss of homes, jobs, refusal of healthcare, pensions and access to social security. Some have been held in detention and others unjustly removed or deported from the UK.

Future hopes

The deportees, who were dumped into exile and poverty, have for 50 years struggled for the right to return. In 2018, their struggle will land in the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which is to hear arguments as to whether Britain violated Mauritian sovereignty when it took over the islands⁶. Though the court's opinion is nonbinding, a favourable judgement for Mauritius will support the campaign to resettle the Chagossian archipelago and address a shameful episode in British colonialism. The U.S. firmly opposes resettlement of any of the 60 islands in the chain claiming that security would be difficult to ensure if resident populations were nearby. British authorities have complied as the presence of the base is considered vital to the US-UK defense relationship and the war on terror. As colonists and explorers in Australia who tried to portray the Indigenous people as having no ties to the land, the UK and US have portrayed the islanders as mere temporary workers.

The only hope at the moment for the people depends on Mauritius regaining control of the islands. Having ignored the plight of the exiles on its soil, the government - envisioning high economic potential - now says it views resettlement and development as a high priority.

In 2018, Britain fought in the United Nations General Assembly to keep the issue out of the international court but lost in a vote of 94 to 15. The Chagossian episode has come to be seen as 'one of the worst violations of human rights perpetrated by the U.K. in the 20th century.' All that the people want is to go back to their homes⁷.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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