

Diego Garcia: It Does Everyone Good to Help the Persecuted and Unjustly Treated

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Could you imagine a situation where you and your family ancestors that have lived and died on your island home for hundreds of years are forcibly removed and scattered around other Indian Ocean islands because the USA wants to build a military base without interference from the 'native' rightful owners -- I am not referring to the 19th century this is happening NOW!



Diego Garcia

This is the story of the dispossessed Chagossians of Diego Garcia and how the USA , the UK and Mauritius conspired together to illegally eject the indigenous population from their rightful home.

This is the classic good fight that fortifies us all should we choose to assist these persecuted people. Fighting for the undeniable right against mass murdering militaristic powers that imagine they can break any law they choose and do whatever they like is a just fight by any definition and is supremely worthy of our involvement. By prevailing against the criminal USA and the thoroughly corrupt UK in the legal and every other arena possible we are able not only to assist those unable to assist themselves but are strengthened in the process to be better able to defend ourselves when the time comes, and it approaches at speed -- I say to you all, save yourself, SAVE the dispossessed people of Diego Garcia!

Story from Truthout follows:

"Absolutely Must Go": The US Military vs. the Exiles of Diego Garcia

by Clare Bayard

The fulcrum of President Obama's "Pacific Pivot" is Diego Garcia, a remote Indian Ocean island housing a city's worth of US military materials on a nuclear-ready base. The location is perfect for projecting power in a number of key regions, and to keep its operations out of sight - and away from contestation, because the native population was removed from the island in order to construct this base. In the middle of last century, as peoples' anti-colonial struggles across Asia and Africa were winning their freedom, the United States and United Kingdom cut a shady deal to sever part of pre-independent Mauritius. The plan was to preserve the British colonial status of the Chagos Islands, exile all the residents, then lease this prize land to the Pentagon for 50 years.

This lease expires in 2016, but the next two months are crucial. The United States and United Kingdom must agree by December 2014 whether to affirm the 20-year optional extension. There are no Chagossians, the original inhabitants of Diego Garcia and the surrounding islands of the Chagos archipelago, involved in these negotiations. And as Mauritian activist Alain Ah-Vee says, "The present Mauritian regime is not putting before the British and US governments any concrete road map for ending this colonization and military occupation of its territory." However, decolonization activists in Mauritius and the diaspora are calling upon Americans to quickly build pressure on Obama to close this key base.

Diego Garcia is key to an economically weak United States struggling to maintain fear-based global dominance. John Pike, an analyst of the US military, says Diego Garcia "is the single most important military facility we've got." His assessment of the military's goal: "We'll be able to run the planet from Guam and Diego Garcia by 2015, even if the entire Eastern Hemisphere has drop-kicked us from bases on their territory." The US military's tactical shift to increasing dependency on aerial missions, backed up with naval power, combines with the strategic location of this Indian Ocean base, leased by the British to the Pentagon. The base has also played a critical role in the CIA's infamous secret renditions program, which transfers US captives to locations where they are then tortured.

This is a crucial moment where the aspirations of the Chagossians to return home might finally receive the international attention they have long been denied. The story of displacement and denial of rights is familiar among people subjected to the brutal calculations of empire. The details of their story are far from familiar in the United States, although our government was the architect and driver of their dispossession.

Why Diego Garcia Matters

Diego Garcia is an African island in the Chagossian archipelago that constitutes part of Mauritius. It is also the largest US military base in Africa, strategically located in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Chagos, the last colony created by Britain, was partitioned from Mauritius in 1963. In the 1960s, the United States told Britain to hand over some Indian Ocean islands, stripped of their inhabitants, suitable for building a massive military base. Diego Garcia was nominated as the most desirable of the options, and the United States offered Britain a \$14 million discount on Polaris nuclear submarines in exchange for a "swept and sanitized" depopulated island, with no native people to contest development of a base.

This base, first sold as a small "communication station," has grown into the largest US base in Africa, although AFRICOM (the US military command of Africa) misleadingly refers to tiny Djibouti as our only formal African base. Diego is a surveillance keystone, as well as the primary launching pad for bombing runs on Iraq and Afghanistan. Diego Garcia recently made headlines after confirmation that the United States did, contrary to its earlier denials, use the British possession for rendition flights. This leaves the United Kingdom potentially vulnerable to legal action, especially after allegations that London pushed Washington to redact information about Diego Garcia in its torture reports. The United Kingdom, in response, has spent the summer destroying public trust by flip-flopping about whether or not critical flight logs were irretrievably water damaged. In

the meantime, the US Senate continues to delay release of its report on CIA torture, which sources in the Senate Intelligence Committee told Al Jazeera will confirm that Diego Garcia has indeed been used as a "black site" for secret detentions and possibly torture.

Even before the post-9/11 military buildup around the Persian Gulf which it serves, Diego Garcia was a key US outpost. In June 2000, the US State Department described it as "an all but indispensable platform . . . for the fulfillment of defense and security responsibilities in the Arabian Gulf, the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa." Its central and isolated location allows Diego Garcia to function as a stable node for the projection of flexible air attacks, backed up by naval power, and for the deployment of special operations forces. Its population doubled with the first Gulf War, and its buildup since the Vietnam War was the fastest of any US base. Diego Garcia has airfields that handle nuclear bombers, ports for nuclear submarines and two dozen enormous cargo ships prepared with material for multiple simultaneous engagements.

Additionally, Diego has a natural defense - the 3,000 to 15,000-foot deep and 400-mile long underwater canyon called the Chagos Trench - against tsunamis, which spared it the brunt of the 2005 tsunami that ravaged the nearby Maldives. This ecological luck will increase in significance as climate change spirals destructively onwards.

A "Land Without a People" for People who Want Land

As empires decline and new ones rise, humans are shuffled like cards and played on the table of power. The Chagossians and their home islands have been used as chips for a sequence of empires. First a French colony, Chagos' plantations were handed off to Britain after Napoleon's defeat. The Chagossians then became the key to a British deal meant to secure their junior position to the United States, emerging after the Cold War as the new global superpower. The United States wanted a military base to control the Indian Ocean and other key chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, and they wanted it uninhabited.

The United States wasn't concerned with facts, namely, that for two centuries, a linguistically and culturally distinct population of Chagossians had been living on these islands. In 1971, the US Navy's definitive instructions to the British about the Chagossians arrived. A three-word telegram read: "Absolutely must go."

In the 1950s, half a century into their expansion in the Pacific, the US Navy realized that their window of opportunity was closing to acquire and retain remote island bases, free from troublesome indigenous populations demanding decolonization and sovereignty. Shrinking British dominance in the Indian Ocean created a vacuum the United States was eager to stake out in order to contain Sino-Soviet motions.

As a part of the deal to gain its own independence, Mauritius collaborated with Britain to dismember the Chagos Islands, though UN decolonization law forbid the partitioning of colonized territories.

Britain renamed Chagos the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT) in 1968 and continues to claim ownership over these islands, claiming that if they ever become unnecessary for "defense purposes," they will be ceded back to Mauritius. The British annexation of Chagos was declared illegal by the UN and the Organization of African

States. The United States is alone in the world in recognizing the BIOT.

In 1971, Navy Captain E.L. Cochrane explained that the State Department, Pentagon and Navy had calculated the factors of exiling the Chagossians, and concluded that "the advantages to having a station on an island which has no other inhabitants makes it worth the risk to ask the British to carry out the relocation."

In order to "sweep and sanitize" as the United States requested, Diego Garcia was slowly cut off and fenced in. Supplies stopped coming to the island. Islanders were encouraged to visit Mauritius for food, supplies and medical care, and told when they attempted to buy boat tickets home that they weren't allowed to return as the island had been sold. In 1971, the last holdouts were terrorized by British officials rounding up and gassing to death all of their dogs in front of their children. A few months after US surveyors landed to begin work on submarine ports, the remaining families were herded onto a boat in the night and dumped - mostly penniless - in Seychelles and Mauritius. The trauma of this forcible eviction and abandonment by the government created intolerable stress, anxiety and depression among these exiles, leading to suicides and deaths from what Chagossians call *sagren*, profound sorrow. In English, they refer to this condition as simply, "the sadness."

Racism Underwrites Empire

The presence of permanent residents was the deal breaking concern of the United States in establishing a base on Diego Garcia. Other US bases used a strategy of "employ, don't expel" indigenous people, as on Guahan/Guam, but the United States resisted pressure from Britain to employ at least some of the islanders on the base. In this historical moment, waves of decolonization were sweeping the world, inducing empires to fear anti-imperialism movements - particularly in Africa and Asia. Removing the population meant nobody would be there to challenge the base or protest at its gates. Chagossians, as descendants of enslaved people, have a history and memory of insurgencies. However, US Navy officials correctly anticipated that Mauritius' leadership would be more interested in obtaining commercial advantages from the British and US authorities, and could be convinced to betray a small and isolated population of mostly African descent.

Expulsion required excuses. The United Kingdom simply fabricated a story that the only people on Diego Garcia were transient laborers who could just be dumped elsewhere (while admitting in internal memos that this was "fiction"). Such a flimsy story only holds if the actual residents are considered somewhat less than fully human, and racist tropes scaffold the strategy in Chagos.

In 1966, the head of Britain's Colonial Office, Lord Denis Greenhill, wrote about Chagos, "The object of the exercise is to get some rocks which will remain ours; there will be no indigenous population except seagulls who have not yet got a committee. Unfortunately, along with the seagulls go some few Tarzans and Man Fridays that are hopefully being wished on Mauritius."

The US Navy never pretended to believe the islands were empty. Its own description of the establishment of "Camp Justice" on Diego Garcia reads: "One of the agreement terms was for an uninhabited island, therefore the United Kingdom deployed all the natives and farmers." Additionally, Diego Garcia is the only international base listed by the US

Navy without a host nation, simply as "Indian Ocean."

"Is it because we came from slaves? Is it because we are black people?" asks Olivier Bancoult, a leader of the Chagossians and electrician by trade, who brought the first legal case to British courts in 2000.

Coming Home: A Long Struggle

One of the primary international voices for Chagossian self-determination is LALIT, a Mauritian political organization with several decades of national leadership in democracy and justice struggles. Like other Pacific Rim indigenous movements against US bases, LALIT does not take a "not in my backyard" approach, but challenges the destructive presence of US bases everywhere. They contribute international leadership to building the global movement against bases, supporting the successful Ecuadorean effort to close the US military base in Manta.

LALIT has three interlinked demands. They demand closure and full cleanup of the base, complete decolonization of Mauritius, and the re-unification of the country and its people, and the right of return and full reparations for displaced Chagossian-Mauritians. In 2011, LALIT formed a Diego committee, bringing together the women's organization, neighborhood-based organizations and trade union federation. They have demonstrated against increasing US presence, and called for a refusal of money or any other donations from the US Embassy until the end of military occupation in Mauritius.

Chagossians are not united on their bottom line with regard to right of return, nor with the Mauritian government that does not represent their interests. Some say keep the base, and just give us the right of return, since limited resettlement onto outer Chagos Islands is possible without reducing the Diego Garcia base. About this possible compromise, Lindsay Collen from LALIT said, "What is the meaning of the right to return, when one does it at the expense of once again being colonized? What is the use in one's own sovereignty, if one's country is used to bombard a wedding procession in Afghanistan?"

Some Chagossians are split between targeting the British for their rights, since they obtained British citizenship in order to enter their case in British courts, and those who are declaring autonomy and want to confront the United States directly. Grassroots organizations like LALIT believe that the Chagossians should have some autonomy in a decolonized Chagos Archipelago inside the republic of Mauritius, and are working to spread recognition of the US military as an occupying force. LALIT is pressuring the Mauritian government to put Chagos on the agenda at the UN General Assembly in order to move for an advisory opinion at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), while the government is focusing on a new strategy of pushing for direct negotiations with the United States.

This struggle began directly after their displacement. Chagossians have a history of powerful direct action, with significant leadership from women. From mass demonstrations in the 1970s, for which leaders went to prison, to hunger strikes for decent housing in the 1980s, to demonstrations in front of government buildings for the right of return, the displaced islanders have not stopped fighting for their rights and homeland.

Britain has thrown different counter tactics at the Chagossians. In the early '80s, tiny compensation grants were awarded in exchange for tricking islanders into signing away their rights to their homeland. No lawyers explained the contract to people, who were encouraged to sign with a thumbprint if they couldn't read the paper. Many say they'd never have signed away their rights if they had known. "I'd never have signed; I'd have continued getting food out of dustbins if I had known. I would never have signed away my rights, never," said Rita Isoult, now 89 years old.

The most recent British curveball is the 2009 establishment of a "marine reserve." Colin Roberts, the BIOT commissioner, stated that establishment of a marine reserve might be the best long-term strategy to prevent Chagossians and their descendants from ever returning home. Cynically, Roberts wrote that the United Kingdom's "environmental lobby is far more powerful than the Chagossians' advocates." LALIT has taken to task Mauritian environmental groups for signing on to this marine reserve creation, which exempts the military base, but seals out the native population.

Now Is the Time

Geopolitical maneuverings over this isolated island will affect the coming decades of the United States' "endless war on terror," and by extension, the lives of millions of people around the world. The most affected, of course, will continue to be the thousands of Chagossians who want to return home. The closest they have come since being evicted in 1971 was Tony Blair's bizarre window dressing trip 10 years ago, which allowed 100 Chagossians to land on Diego Garcia for one day. They were not allowed to visit their empty houses. Some fell to the ground weeping. Others spent the day tending the overgrown graves of their ancestors.

The rest of us will secondarily feel the impacts of the United States' continued use of Diego Garcia to project gunboat diplomacy, particularly with the rise of China and the expansion throughout Africa of new Cold War proxy battlefields between the United States and China.

Diego Garcia is inarguably a case of jettisoning human rights in favor of militarism. From the initial evictions to the continued backroom deals to protect the base at the expense of the native population, the details vary but the story echoes from Okinawa to the Philippines to Italy.

WikiLeaks released cables in 2010 that revealed full awareness and disingenuous conspiring by the British government. Roberts, the BIOT commissioner, cabled to the White House in 2009, "We do not regret the removal of the population," stating that this removal was necessary for the BIOT to "fulfill its strategic purpose."

It's not too late for the United Kingdom and the United States to get on the right side of history. Even Stu Barber, the naval planner who engineered the "strategic islands concept" that underwrote the betrayal of Diego Garcia, wrote a (unpublished) letter to The Washington Post, in 1991, saying the eviction "wasn't necessary militarily." Barber said, "It seems to me to be a good time to review whether we should now take steps to redress the inexcusably inhuman wrongs inflicted by the British at our insistence on the former inhabitants of Diego Garcia and other Chagos group islands. The costs would be trivial compared with what we invested in construction and what we gained."

If even the author of the Chagossians' removal could come around to this realization, there is real potential for peoples' movements for democracy and self-determination to create sufficient pressure to repair these wrongs. And if the world can support the Chagossians-Mauritians in reunifying and decolonizing their homeland, we can reduce the destructive capacity of US empire.

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<http://tinyurl.com/kpksj46>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-1306.html>