

An Overlooked Atrocity: US Base on Diego Garcia

by Sheldon Richman via sal - ICH *Thursday, Jun 6 2013, 9:19am*

international / prose / post

The largest criminal organizations in the world are governments. The bigger they are, the more capable of perpetrating atrocities. Not only do they obtain great wealth through compulsion (taxation), they also have an ideological mystique that permits them uniquely to get away with murder, torture, and theft.



The U.S. government is no exception. This is demonstrated by, among many other things, the atomic bombings of noncombatants in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World II. But let's examine a lesser-known case, one we might know nothing about were it not for David Vine, who teaches anthropology at the American University. Vine has written a book, *Island of Shame*, and a follow-up article at the Huffington Post about the savage treatment of the people of Diego Garcia, part of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean. Americans may know Diego Garcia as a U.S. military base. It "helped launch the Afghan and Iraq wars and was part of the CIA's secret 'rendition' program for captured terrorist suspects," Vine writes.

What's not widely known is that the island was once home to a couple of thousand people who were forcibly removed to make room for the U.S. military. The victims' 40-year effort to return or to be compensated for their losses have been futile.

Great Britain claims the island. According to Vine, African slaves, indentured Indians, and their descendants had been living on the Chagos islands for about 200 years. "In 1965, after years of secret negotiations, Britain agreed to separate Chagos from colonial Mauritius (contravening UN decolonization rules) to create a new colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory. In a secret 1966 agreement, Britain gave U.S. officials base rights on Diego Garcia."

But it did more than that. Britain "agreed to take those 'administrative measures' necessary to remove the nearly 2,000 Chagossians in exchange for \$14 million in secret U.S. payments."

The British kept their end of the bargain. In 1968, Britain began blocking the return of Chagossians who left to obtain medical treatment or to go on vacation, "marooning them often without family members and almost all their possessions," Vine writes.

British officials soon began restricting food and medical supplies to Chagos. Anglo-American officials designed a public relations plan aimed at, as one British bureaucrat said, "maintaining the fiction" that Chagossians were migrant laborers rather than a people with roots in Chagos for five

generations or more. Another British official called them “Tarzans” and “Man Fridays.”

Then, in 1971, the final order came down, reminiscent of a Russian czar expelling Jews from their village. “The U.S. Navy’s highest-ranking admiral, Elmo Zumwalt, issued ... a three-word memo... ‘Absolutely must go.’”

British agents, with the help of Navy Seabees, quickly rounded up the islanders’ pet dogs, gassing and burning them in sealed cargo sheds. They ordered ... the remaining Chagossians onto overcrowded cargo ships. During the deportations, which took place in stages until May 1973, most Chagossians slept in the ship’s hold atop guano — bird crap. Prized horses stayed on deck. By the end of the five-day trip, vomit, urine, and excrement were everywhere. At least one woman miscarried.

Arriving in Mauritius and the Seychelles, Chagossians were literally left on the docks. They were homeless, jobless, and had little money, and they received no resettlement assistance.

Remember, this was happening, not in the 18th or 19th century, but in the late 20th century. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the last of the expulsions.

The personal toll has been great. The Chagossians remain poor, and many suffer from illnesses traced to their dispossession. “Scores more Chagossians have reported deaths from sadness and sagren,” or “profound sorrow,” according to Vine.

Five years ago the Chagossians had some ray of hope when three British courts declared the deportations illegal. But the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom overruled the lower courts. “Last year,” Vine adds, “the European Court of Human Rights dismissed the Chagossians’ final appeal on procedural grounds....”

“A day after the European court ruling, the Obama administration rejected the demands of an online petition signed by some 30,000 asking the White House to ‘redress wrongs against the Chagossians.’”

The British were adequately looking after the matter, the administration said.

Here is government in all its glory.

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