

Raw Deals: The Continued Shafting of the Chagossians. The Status of the Largest Chagos Island, The U.S Diego Garcia Military Base

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Region: [Europe](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

It was a spectacular example of a non-event, alloyed by pure symbolism and cynicism. Here was a British government offering – how generous of them – to return sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, whose residents had been brutally displaced between 1965 to 1973, to Mauritius.

In an October 3 [joint statement](#) between London and Port Louis, all but one of the Chagos Islands will be relinquished to Mauritian control.

“Following two years of negotiation, this is a seminal moment in our relationship and a demonstration of our enduring commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes and the rule of law.” Negotiations had “been conducted in a constructive and respectful manner, as equal sovereign states, on the basis of international law,” a point made so explicitly it had to be questioned.

Attention would have immediately shifted to the status of the largest island, Diego Garcia, where the US strategic military base [crudely nicknamed](#) the “Footprint for Freedom” is located. “Under the terms of this treaty the United Kingdom will agree that Mauritius is sovereign over the Chagos Archipelago, including Diego Garcia.” Then comes the big, fat qualifier: both countries had agreed to ensure that the base, which played “a vital role in regional and global security” (read US global military dominance) would continue to operate unimpeded. “For an initial period of 99 years, the United Kingdom will be authorised to exercise with respect to Diego Garcia the sovereign rights and authorities of Mauritius required to ensure the continued operation of the base well into the next century.” To buy favour with Mauritius, Britain promises “a package of financial support”.

In 1965, the UK effectively bought off Mauritius regarding its hold over the Chagos Islands for the less than princely sum of £3 million. Displacement of the 3,000 islanders to Mauritius and the Seychelles followed the bribery, a splendid example of British observance of peaceful resolution and the rule of law. In 1966, the UK Permanent Under-Secretary [remarked](#) in a note of abundant nastiness that, “The object of the exercise was to get some rocks which will remain ours; there will be no indigenous population except seagulls who have not yet got a Committee (the Status of Women does not cover the rights of Birds).”

A hand scribbled comment on the same note also observed that, “along with the birds go some few Tarzans or Men Fridays” who had to be moved on. The eviction of the locals became the prelude to the construction of the US military facility.

In its efforts to spoil and foil any claims for resettlement by the Chagossians, the British

government could be inventive. As humble servitors to the US occupants on Diego Garcia, the UK Foreign Office [proposed](#) turning the area around the archipelago into a Marine Protected Area (MPA). Counterfeit environmentalism could be used in power's favour.

In 2015, the Permanent Court of Arbitration [found](#) that the declaration of such an MPA in April 2010 was incompatible with Britain's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The declaration failed to acknowledge, for instance, undertakings made in 1965 that Mauritius held binding rights to fish in the waters around the archipelago and the eventual return of the islands to Mauritius once it had ceased being militarily useful.

In 2019 the International Court of Justice [found](#) that "the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed when that country acceded to independence in 1968, following the separation of the Chagos Archipelago." Britain was "under an obligation to bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible." The UK Foreign Office, again showing how respectful it can be of international law when cornered, [diminished](#) the standing of the ICJ decision. "This is an advisory opinion, not a judgment," it concluded.

The UN General Assembly begged to differ, [adopting a resolution](#) that same year demanding the unconditional withdrawal of Britain's colonial administration from the islands within six months. The resolution recorded favourable 116 votes, with 56 abstentions. Only six states opposed the measure, including such noisy paragons of the "rules-based order" as Australia, Israel and the United States.

The treaty, according to the joint statement, "will address the wrongs of the past and demonstrate the commitment of both parties to the welfare of Chagossians." It does nothing of the sort, limiting any resettlement program to the wishes of Mauritius while exempting Diego Garcia altogether from such arrangements. In doing so, the agreement, [states](#) UK Foreign Minister British Lammy, will "strengthen our role in safeguarding global security" while also preventing "any possibility of the Indian Ocean being used as a dangerous illegal migration route to the UK."

US **President Joe Biden**, however, has the most reason to delight in the outcome. Washington retains its warmaking facility in the Indian Ocean [on the pretext](#) of demonstrating a "shared commitment to regional stability" while supposedly reaching "peaceful and mutually beneficial outcomes".

Coy, congratulatory assessments can even be found among the cognoscenti. **Peter Harris**, for instance, makes an unapardonably [inaccurate assessment](#) in *The Conversation*: "The deal announced is a good one - a rare 'win-win-win-win' moment in international relations, with all the relevant actors able to claim a meaningful victory: Britain, Mauritius, the US, and the Chagossians."

The last group can claim, accurately, to have again been treated as ongoing victims of callous colonial rule, despite the [hopeful optimism](#) of such individuals as Isabelle Charlot, chair of the Chagos Islander Movement. The advocacy group, Chagossian Voices, [deplored](#) "the exclusion of the Chagossian community from the negotiations which have produced this statement of intent concerning the sovereignty of our homeland."

Raymonde Desiree, who was 25 when evicted from the islands made her [intentions](#) clear. "Going back to the Chagos Islands under Mauritian rule, that's not going to happen." Now a

resident in the West Sussex town of Crawley, which hosts a large Chagossian diaspora, she makes the emphatic point: “We were not consulted... They should have given us the right of self-determination.” That, it would seem, was never going to happen.

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