

The Truth About Diego Garcia: 50 Years of Fiction About an American Military Base

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Global Research, October 24, 2015

[TomDispatch](#) 14 June 2015

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Note: This article was first published in June 2015.

The U.S. military facility on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean represents a horrific example of the human costs of war and imperialism.

First, they tried to shoot the dogs. Next, they tried to poison them with strychnine. When both failed as efficient killing methods, British government agents and U.S. Navy personnel used raw meat to lure the pets into a sealed shed. Locking them inside, they gassed the howling animals with exhaust piped in from U.S. military vehicles. Then, setting coconut husks ablaze, they burned the dogs' carcasses as their owners were left to watch and ponder their own fate.

The truth about the U.S. military base on the British-controlled Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia is often hard to believe. It would be easy enough to confuse the real story with fictional accounts of the island found in the [Transformers](#) movies, on the television series [24](#), and in Internet conspiracy [theories](#) about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370.

While the grim [saga](#) of Diego Garcia frequently reads like fiction, it has proven all too real for the people involved. It's the story of a U.S. military base built on a series of real-life fictions told by U.S. and British officials over more than half a century. The central fiction is that the U.S. built its base on an "uninhabited" island. That was "true" only because the indigenous people were secretly exiled from the Chagos Archipelago when the base was built. Although their ancestors had lived there since the time of the American Revolution, Anglo-American officials decided, as one wrote, to "[maintain the fiction](#) that the inhabitants of Chagos [were] not a permanent or semi-permanent population," but just "transient contract workers." The same official summed up the situation bluntly: "We are able to make up the rules as we go along."

And so they did: between 1968 and 1973, American officials conspired with their British colleagues to remove the Chagossians, carefully hiding their expulsion from Congress, Parliament, the U.N., and the media. During the deportations, British agents and members of a U.S. Navy construction battalion rounded up and killed all those pet dogs. Their owners were then deported to the western Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1,200 miles from their homeland, where they received no resettlement assistance. More than 40 years after their expulsion, Chagossians generally remain the poorest of the poor in their adopted lands, struggling to survive in places that outsiders know as exotic tourist destinations.

During the same period, Diego Garcia became a multi-billion-dollar [Navy and Air Force base](#) and a [central node](#) in U.S. military efforts to [control the Greater Middle East](#) and its oil and natural gas supplies. The base, which few Americans are aware of, is more important strategically and more secretive than the U.S. naval base-cum-prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Unlike Guantánamo, no journalist has gotten more than a [glimpse](#) of Diego Garcia in [more than](#) 30 years. And yet, it has played a [key role](#) in waging the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, and the current bombing campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Following [years](#) of [reports](#) that the base was a secret CIA “black site” for holding terrorist suspects and years of denials by U.S. and British officials, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic finally fessed up in 2008. “Contrary to earlier explicit assurances,” said Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs David Miliband, Diego Garcia had indeed played at least some [role](#) in the CIA’s secret “[rendition](#)” program.

Last year, British officials claimed that flight log records, which might have shed light on those rendition operations, were “incomplete due to water damage” [thanks to](#) “extremely heavy weather in June 2014.” A week later, they suddenly reversed themselves, saying that the “previously wet paper records have been dried out.” Two months later, they [insisted](#) the logs had not dried out at all and were “damaged to the point of no longer being useful.” Except that the British government’s own weather data indicates that June 2014 was an [unusually dry](#) month on Diego Garcia. A legal rights advocate said British officials “could hardly be less credible if they simply said ‘the dog ate my homework.’”

And these are just a few of the fictions underlying the base that occupies the Chagossians’ former home and that the U.S. military has nicknamed the “[Footprint of Freedom](#).” After more than four decades of exile, however, with a Chagossian movement to return to their homeland growing, the fictions of Diego Garcia may finally be crumbling.

No “Tarzans”

The [story](#) of Diego Garcia begins in the late eighteenth century. At that time, enslaved peoples from Africa, brought to work on Franco-Mauritian coconut plantations, became the first settlers in the Chagos Archipelago. Following emancipation and the arrival of indentured laborers from India, a diverse mixture of peoples created a new society with its own language, Chagos Kreol. They called themselves the Ilois — the Islanders.

While still a plantation society, the archipelago, by then under British colonial control, provided a secure life featuring universal employment and numerous social benefits on islands described by many as idyllic. “That beautiful atoll of Diego Garcia, right in the middle of the ocean,” is how Stuart Barber described it in the late 1950s. A civilian working for the U.S. Navy, Barber would become the architect of one of the most powerful U.S. military bases overseas.

Amid Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, Barber and other officials were concerned that there was almost no U.S. military presence in and around the Indian Ocean. Barber noted that Diego Garcia’s isolation — halfway between Africa and Indonesia and 1,000 miles south of India — ensured that it would be safe from attack, yet was still within striking distance of territory from southern Africa and the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia.

Guided by Barber’s idea, the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson

convinced the British government to detach the Chagos Archipelago from colonial Mauritius and create a new colony, which they called the British Indian Ocean Territory. Its sole purpose would be to house U.S. military facilities.

During secret negotiations with their British counterparts, Pentagon and State Department officials insisted that Chagos come under their “exclusive control (without local inhabitants),” embedding an expulsion order in a polite-looking parenthetical phrase. U.S. officials wanted the islands “swept” and “sanitized.” British officials appeared happy to oblige, removing a people one official called “Tarzans” and, in a racist reference to *Robinson Crusoe*, “Man Fridays.”

“Absolutely Must Go”

This plan was confirmed with an [“exchange of notes”](#) signed on December 30, 1966, by U.S. and British officials, as one of the State Department negotiators [told me](#), “under the cover of darkness.” The notes effectively constituted a treaty but required no Congressional or Parliamentary approval, meaning that both governments could keep their plans hidden.

According to the agreement, the United States would gain use of the new colony “without charge.” This was another fiction. In [confidential minutes](#), the United States agreed to secretly wipe out a \$14 million British military debt, circumventing the need to ask Congress for funding. In exchange, the British agreed to take the “administrative measures” necessary for “resettling the inhabitants.”

Those measures meant that, after 1967, any Chagossians who left home for medical treatment or a routine vacation in Mauritius were barred from returning. Soon, British officials began restricting the flow of food and medical supplies to Chagos. As conditions deteriorated, more islanders began leaving. By 1970, the U.S. Navy had secured funding for what officials told Congress would be an “austere communications station.” They were, however, already planning to ask for additional funds to expand the facility into a much larger base. As the Navy’s Office of Communications and Cryptology explained, “The communications requirements cited as justification are fiction.” By the 1980s, Diego Garcia would become a billion-dollar garrison.

In briefing papers delivered to Congress, the Navy described Chagos’s population as “negligible,” with the islands “for all practical purposes... uninhabited.” In fact, there were around 1,000 people on Diego Garcia in the 1960s and 500 to 1,000 more on other islands in the archipelago. With Congressional funds secured, the Navy’s highest-ranking admiral, Elmo Zumwalt, summed up the Chagossians’ fate in a 1971 memo of exactly three words: “Absolutely must go.”

The authorities soon ordered the remaining Chagossians — generally allowed no more than a single box of belongings and a sleeping mat — onto overcrowded cargo ships destined for Mauritius and the Seychelles. By 1973, the last Chagossians were gone.

“Abject Poverty”

At their destinations, most of the Chagossians were literally left on the docks, homeless, jobless, and with little money. In 1975, two years after the last removals, a *Washington Post* reporter found them living in “abject poverty.”

[Aurélie Lisette Talate](#) was one of the last to go. “I came to Mauritius with six children and my

mother,” she told me. “We got our house... but the house didn’t have a door, didn’t have running water, didn’t have electricity. And then my children and I began to suffer. All my children started getting sick.”

Within two months, two of her children were dead. The second was buried in an unmarked grave because she lacked money for a proper burial. Aurélie experienced fainting spells herself and couldn’t eat. “We were living like animals. Land? We had none... Work? We had none. Our children weren’t going to school.”

Today, most Chagossians, who now number more than 5,000, remain impoverished. In their language, their lives are ones of *lamizer* (impoverished misery) and *sagren* (profound sorrow and heartbreak over being [exiled](#) from their native lands). Many of the islanders attribute sickness and even death to *sagren*. “I had something that had been affecting me for a long time, since we were uprooted,” was the way Aurélie explained it to me. “This *sagren*, this shock, it was this same problem that killed my child. We weren’t living free like we did in our natal land.”

Struggling for Justice

From the moment they were deported, the Chagossians demanded to be returned or at least properly resettled. After years of protest, including five hunger strikes led by women like Aurélie Talate, some in Mauritius received the most modest of compensation from the British government: small concrete houses, tiny plots of land, and about \$6,000 per adult. Many used the money to pay off large debts they had accrued. For most, conditions improved only marginally. Those living in the Seychelles received nothing.

The Chagossian struggle was reinvigorated in 1997 with the launching of a [lawsuit](#) against the British government. In November 2000, the British High Court ruled the removal illegal. In 2001 and 2002, most Chagossians joined new lawsuits in both American and British courts demanding the right to return and [proper compensation](#) for their removal and for resettling their islands. The U.S. suit was ultimately dismissed on the grounds that the judiciary can’t, in most circumstances, overrule the executive branch on matters of military and foreign policy. In Britain, the Chagossians were more successful. In 2002, they secured the right to full U.K. citizenship. Over 1,000 Chagossians have since [moved to Britain](#) in search of better lives. Twice more, British courts ruled in the people’s favor, with judges calling the government’s behavior “[repugnant](#)” and an “[abuse of power](#).”

On the government’s final appeal, however, Britain’s then highest court, the Law Lords in the House of Lords, upheld the exile in a [3-2 decision](#). The Chagossians appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to overturn the ruling.

A Green Fiction

Before the European Court could rule, the British government announced the creation of the world’s largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Chagos Archipelago. The date of the announcement, April Fool’s Day 2010, should have been a clue that there was [more than environmentalism](#) behind the move. The MPA banned commercial fishing and limited other human activity in the archipelago, endangering the viability of any resettlement efforts.

And then came WikiLeaks. In December 2010, it released a State Department [cable](#) from the U.S. Embassy in London quoting a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office official saying

that the “former inhabitants would find it difficult, if not impossible, to pursue their claim for resettlement on the islands if the entire Chagos Archipelago were a marine reserve.” U.S. officials agreed. According to the Embassy, Political Counselor Richard Mills wrote, “Establishing a marine reserve might, indeed... be the most effective long-term way to prevent any of the Chagos Islands’ former inhabitants or their descendants from resettling.”

Not surprisingly, the main State Department concern was whether the MPA would affect base operations. “We are concerned,” the London Embassy noted, that some “would come to see the existence of a marine reserve as inherently inconsistent with the military use of Diego Garcia.” British officials assured the Americans there would be “no constraints on military operations.”

Although the [European Court of Human Rights](#) ultimately ruled against the Chagossians in 2013, this March, a U.N. tribunal found that the British government had [violated international law](#) in creating the Marine Protected Area. Next week, Chagossians will challenge the MPA and their expulsion before the British Supreme Court (now Britain’s highest) armed with the U.N. ruling and revelations that the government won its House of Lords decision with the help of a fiction-filled resettlement study.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament has passed a resolution calling for the Chagossians’ return, the African Union has condemned their deportation as unlawful, three Nobel laureates have spoken out on their behalf, and dozens of members of the British Parliament have joined a group supporting their struggle. In January, a British government “[feasibility study](#)” found no significant legal barriers to resettling the islands and outlined several possible resettlement plans, beginning with Diego Garcia. (Notably, Chagossians are not calling for the removal of the U.S. military base. Their opinions about it are diverse and complicated. At least some would prefer jobs on the base to lives of poverty and unemployment in exile.)

Of course, no study was needed to know that resettlement on Diego Garcia and in the rest of the archipelago is feasible. The base, which has hosted thousands of military and civilian personnel for more than 40 years, has demonstrated that well enough. In fact, Stuart Barber, its architect, came to the [same conclusion](#) in the years before his death. After he learned of the Chagossians’ fate, he wrote a series of impassioned letters to Human Rights Watch and the British Embassy in Washington, among others, imploring them to help the Chagossians return home. In a letter to Alaska Senator Ted Stevens, he said bluntly that the expulsion “wasn’t necessary militarily.”

In a 1991 letter to the *Washington Post*, Barber suggested that it was time “to redress the inexcusably inhuman wrongs inflicted by the British at our insistence.” He added, “Substantial additional compensation for 18-25 past years of misery for all evictees is certainly in order. Even if that were to cost \$100,000 per family, we would be talking of a maximum of \$40-50 million, modest compared with our base investment there.”

Almost a quarter-century later, nothing has yet been done. In 2016, the initial 50-year agreement for Diego Garcia will expire. While it is subject to an automatic 20-year renewal, it provides for a two-year renegotiation period, which commenced in late 2014. With momentum building in support of the Chagossians, they are optimistic that the two governments will finally correct this historic injustice. That U.S. officials allowed the British feasibility study to consider resettlement plans for Diego Garcia is a hopeful sign that Anglo-American policy may finally be shifting to right a great wrong in the Indian Ocean.

Unfortunately, Aurélie Talate will never see the day when her people go home. Like others among the rapidly dwindling number of Chagossians born in the archipelago, Aurélie died in 2012 at age 70, succumbing to the heartbreak that is *sagren*.

David Vine, a [TomDispatch regular](#), is associate professor of anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C. His new book, [Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World](#) will be published in August as part of the [American Empire Project](#) (Metropolitan Books). He is also the author of [Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia](#). He has written for the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Guardian, and Mother Jones, among other publications. For more of his writing, visit www.davidvine.net.

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