Former Diego Garcia islanders launch legal action against British government

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Islanders removed from the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean in the 1960s by the British government launched a legal action in the London High Court on Monday. Between 1966 and the early 1970s, the Labour government of Harold Wilson evicted approximately 1,500 inhabitants of Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon, in a deal struck with the US military.

In return for the islanders' removal and exclusion from the British colony, London reportedly received an $11 million discount on the purchase of the US-made Polaris nuclear weapons system. The main island, Diego Garcia, became a strategic base for the US military during the Cold War and was used to supply its forces in the Red Sea and Vietnam. B-52 bombers were also stationed on the island during the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq.

Former islander Louis Bancoult, chairman of the Chagos Refugee Group in Mauritius, is bringing the legal action. Bancoult contends that the removal violated the human rights of the islanders, officially British subjects, and was illegal under the terms of the 13th Magna Carta prohibiting the banishment of citizens of the realm. Many of the islanders were taken to Mauritius, more than 1,300 miles away. He is demanding the right of return for the remaining 500 islanders and their 3,800 descendants. The Blair government has said that it will contest the action.

The US first expressed an interest in the islands to Britain in 1964, in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. At the time, the Chagos islands were part of Mauritius, then a British colony. To facilitate their use as a military base, Britain granted Mauritius independence in 1965, on condition that it handed the islands over to its control. The Chagos islands—together with those of Aldabra, Desroches and Farquhar—were formed into a new colonial entity, the British Indian Ocean Territory. Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon were then leased on to the US military for 50 years.

Washington had stipulated that it did not want a “population problem” on the islands, so British officials organised what was described as “the complete sterilisation of the archipelago”. The islanders say that Britain did this by withdrawing essential services and stopping the provision of supply ships. Those who left the islands for a short period were not allowed back. Many were taken away by ship to Mauritius, which reportedly received £3 million in return. To ensure United Nations backing, Britain argued that there were no indigenous inhabitants with a right of self-determination on the island, and that the island's population consisted of “contract labourers”.

The islanders reject this, saying that they were never consulted about their removal and that the action condemned them and their families to a lifetime of poverty. Many only received minimal compensation after waiting seven years. Fully 90 percent of the island's former inhabitants are now unemployed and living in Mauritius's slums. They argue that, as only the western side of Diego Garcia is used by the US military, they could live on the eastern side and on the two remaining islands.

Press reports have put the focus on the government's embarrassment as its “ethical foreign policy” is called into question yet again. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook will represent the government should the High Court rule that the case can go to trial. In the 1970s, when the islanders' eviction first came to light, Cook was one of the most outspoken critics of the action within the Labour Party.

The case sheds light on a particularly contentious

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period in British post-war politics. Secret documents recently released to the Public Records Office indicate that the British government did receive a discount on its Polaris nuclear weapons system and £5 million from the US. According to the *Independent* newspaper, the documents contain a memo from Labour's Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart to Wilson in April 1969, which confirms that the agreement was kept secret from parliament and the US Congress.

Polaris became a political scandal for the Wilson government. In opposition, Wilson had attacked the development of a supposed “independent nuclear deterrent” for Britain and pledged to scrap the nuclear submarine programme if Labour were elected. Within days of entering office in October 1964, this stance was reversed. Claiming that the programme would prove too costly to abandon, Labour went on to further develop Britain's nuclear weapons programme, running up military spending to more than £400 million a year.

For the British ruling class, Polaris was crucial on several fronts. Britain's humiliating withdrawal from the Suez Canal in 1956, at US insistence, had shown that it lacked the military capability and political clout required to defend its remaining imperial possessions. Its “independent deterrent” was aimed at rectifying this—it initially refused to integrate its nuclear weapons into the NATO system—reinforcing Britain's claim to “Great Power” status.

In reality, the Polaris programme was entirely dependent on the US, both technologically and financially. The contradiction between Britain's global ambitions and its resources meant that the Polaris deal was only one of a number of arrangements made between the US and the UK during this period. In return for US help in trying to strengthen the pound in September 1965, an informal agreement was made that the Wilson government would tighten spending, control wage rises and also support American intervention against Vietnam.

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