

Diego Garcia islanders fight to go home

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15 September 2003

A large number of islanders from Diego Garcia have been camped out at Gatwick airport just south of London. Recent arrivals have joined a group that came last September and others who arrived in June this year.

The local council of Crawley in Sussex has now taken responsibility for more than 100 Diego Garcians. They are part of a community of 5,000 that live in abject poverty in the slum towns of Mauritius. The islanders were forcibly removed from the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean in the 1960s and early 1970s by the Labour government of Harold Wilson. To get to Gatwick the islanders often had to sell all their possessions to pay for their airline tickets.

The islanders, who won the right to full British citizenship several years ago, launched a legal action in the London High Court in July 2000 against their illegal deportation and enforced stay in Mauritius and won a historic ruling that agreed that the eviction was illegal. The case did not go to appeal because British authorities accepted the judge's decision. British government officials declared that the indigenous citizens were free to return but in a cynical sleight of hand, the islanders could only return to the "outer homeland islands only." They could visit Diego Garcia as part of a handpicked group of up to 100 to see the graves of their families, but would then have to leave. Even this pitiful decision was opposed by the US government on the grounds that re-colonisation of the outer islands is not possible because they are too close to a US naval base and could be used by "terrorist and spies which could use electronic jamming from the other islands."

Diego Garcia, or 7 00 S, 71 30 E as it is named by the United States Navy, is in the Southern Hemisphere. A place of natural beauty inhabited for hundreds of years by a people living by means of fishing and the extraction of oil from the copra or coconuts until their eviction, the island has been transformed into a globally strategic military naval compound. The island, which stretches 34 miles from end to end with a harbour entrance opening to the North-Northwest, is termed an atoll with an actual

landmass encompassing only 6,720 acres. The 40 miles of shoreline encloses a lagoon 6.5 miles wide and 13 miles long. This small dot on the map has been transformed into the largest military base outside of the US.

The US first expressed interest in the island in 1964, in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis and the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union. This was the same period when many African countries achieved political independence and turned to the Soviet Union for aid. The US was on the verge of full-scale intervention in Vietnam, precipitating a crisis made worse by increased social conflict within America itself. Britain, having lost much of its old colonial influence, was also being dragged into a conflict in Rhodesia after its Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI).

Strategically Diego Garcia came into its own as a platform from which to defend US interests overseas and to project its military might. The Chagos Islands, of which Diego Garcia is the largest, were part of Mauritius and one of Britain's last overseas colonies. The British agreed to independence for Mauritius on the proviso that it could pick and choose which Mauritius islands would be given independence. A line was drawn around Diego Garcia, Aldabra, Desroches and Farquhar, which then became part of a new formation of islands under Britain's control called British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Mauritius then became independent and in 1965 the BIOT islands were leased to the US for 50 years.

For construction of the naval base, the US demanded that the island be free of any inhabitants. Washington described this as a "population problem" which had to be resolved. British officials responded by organising what was described as "the complete sterilisation of the archipelago." This involved the total withdrawal of all essential services, the cutting off electrical and medical supplies and an end to the provision of food supply ships. Information on this forced evacuation came to light with the release of documents from the 1960s. Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a leading figure in the British Foreign Office, wrote at the time, "we must be very tough about this" and

that “there will be no indigenous population [on Diego Garcia] except seagulls.”

One diplomat declared in another document, “Unfortunately along with the birds go a few Tarzan and Man Fridays whose origins are obscure, and who are being hopefully whisked on to Mauritius.”

The forcible removal was justified to the United Nation with a blatant lie: that there was no indigenous population and only contract workers on the island.

Leasing of the island to the US was partly in return for an agreement that America would give Britain Polaris nuclear weapons systems at a huge discount. This agreement was kept secret from the British parliament, US Congress and the UN at the time.

Polaris subsequently became the focus of a political scandal for the Wilson government. While 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 was elected. Within days of entering office in October 1964, however, this stance was reversed with claims that the programme would prove too costly to abandon.

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. Britain initially refused to integrate its nuclear weapons into the NATO system, reinforcing its 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 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 America intervention in Vietnam.

This particular political partnership between the US and Britain was revealed in 1995 when the UN Pelindaba Treaty for a Nuclear-Weapons Free Africa was signed by all the countries involved—with the specific exemption of Diego Garcia.

With the illegal eviction of the inhabitants, construction of the US Naval Communication Facility began on March 24, 1971. Since the Vietnam War the port has been a main

base for both naval and aerial interventions. Diego Garcia was designated as a base for “pre-positioned materials to support a rapid deployment force”. A \$6.1 million project was agreed to develop the natural lagoon into a large ship channel and important turning basin. Congress later authorised \$28.6 million to further expand the military base. By the end of 1980, a massive \$100 million was spent on dredging the island to expand the berthing facilities, as well as the extension of the 8,000 feet runway to 12,000 feet, with parking aprons and taxiways. In 2000 Diego Garcia was home to at least seven B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers and seven KC-135 refuelling tanks.

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 saw the most dramatic build-up of Diego Garcia as a military base and a major component in US imperialism’s global ambitions.

In the 1990s the island was used as a critical refuelling base during the first Gulf War. Its population doubled with the development of a Strategic Air Command Bombardment Wing and served as a base for B-52 bombers. Diego Garcia was a key part of US military and naval operations during the US intervention in Somalia. In 2001 the island was used to launch B-1 and B-52 bomber operations against Afghanistan. “Hot-pit” refuelling and crew changes were made on the island and, according to some reports, the base was used for the interrogation of Al Qaeda suspects. Its most recent work involved the military occupation of Iraq. “Climate controlled hangers” were installed to protect the top-secret stealth coating of B-52 that make them “invisable” to conventional detection radar systems.

The Chagos islanders now based in Crawley are suing the British and US governments for damages and demanding that the original 2000 decision by the London High Courts is enforced. A fresh court judgement will be given in the next few weeks.



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