

UN endorses International Court of Justice hearing on Chagos Islands/Diego Garcia

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The UN General Assembly has backed a resolution to refer the legal status of the Chagos Islands, including Diego Garcia, to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague.

The Chagos Islands, which make up the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), are located halfway between Tanzania and Indonesia. Diego Garcia, the largest island in the chains, is the site of a US airbase.

The UN resolution concerns one of the most disgraceful incidents in post-war British colonial history.

Mauritius, which holds a sovereignty claim over the islands, brought the resolution on behalf of the Chagos Islanders, who have long disputed British rule, their illegal eviction in the 1960s and subsequent inhumane treatment.

Last November, the UK restated its refusal to allow the Chagossians to return to their homeland, precipitating the appeal to the UN General Assembly.

Although any decision by the ICJ will be non-binding, the resolution is a humiliating defeat for Britain. Ninety-four countries supported the resolution, with only 15, including the US, opposing it. A further 65 countries abstained, including many European Union states, Canada and China.

The UN rejected Britain's arguments that the Chagos issue is about security and a bilateral matter between it and Mauritius. Anerood Jugnauth, Mauritius' Defence Minister, insisted that Mauritius had no problem with the US operating on Diego Garcia. Britain's ambassador to the UN Matthew Rycroft effectively conceded that Britain had no claim to the islands, telling the UN that Britain had told Mauritius that it would "cede" its claim to the Chagos Islands when they were no longer required for military purposes. No date has been set for this supposed end-point.

Making clear the broader considerations involved, Rycroft warned of possible challenges to other colonial powers that still maintain small territories around the world. The General Assembly should not interfere in a dispute between countries, he said, but let Britain and Mauritius resolve the dispute themselves. "Just think: How many other bilateral disputes left over from history could be brought before the General Assembly this way? The present draft resolution could set a precedent that many of you in this hall could come to regret."

The US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley intervened to support Britain, sending out a similar warning in a letter urging members to vote against the resolution as it would set a "precedent for future bilateral disputes."

For more than five decades, Britain has carried out one crime after another against the Chagossian Islanders, lying, ignoring court decisions, and covering up its actions in pursuit of its imperialist interests.

Harold Wilson's Labour government separated the islands from Mauritius prior to its independence in 1965, in breach of a UN resolution 1514 passed in 1960, which specifically banned the breakup of colonies before independence, to form a new colonial entity, the BIOT.

It went on to evict approximately 1,500 inhabitants of Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon, in the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, in a sordid deal struck with Washington that official papers show was even kept secret from Parliament and the US Congress.

The US military would lease Diego Garcia for 50 years, with an option to renew, from the British and establish a launch base there for its operations in the Middle East and Asia. In return for the islanders'

removal and exclusion from the British colony, which was an unspoken condition for the deal, the US gave Britain an \$11 million discount on the purchase of the US-made Polaris nuclear weapons system, which Labour had pledged to scrap when in opposition.

Sir Paul Gore-Booth, a leading figure in the British Foreign Office, wrote at the time, in a document that later became public, “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.”

Britain justified the forcible removal of the Chagossians with a downright lie: that there was no indigenous population, only “contract” or “plantation” workers on the island.

Established in 1971, Diego Garcia became a strategic base for the US military during the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the base was expanded and used for operations in the wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and elsewhere. It became notorious for its use in the CIA’s illegal “extraordinary rendition” and torture programme, with which Britain has fully collaborated.

The 1,500 Islanders were illegally deported to Mauritius and the Seychelles, another former British colony, where they have lived in desperately impoverished conditions, with a few being allowed into Britain. Since then, they and their descendants, who now number 10,000, have campaigned vociferously for their rights against a conspiracy of silence, obfuscation, temporising and lies. In the 1990s, the few who settled in Britain finally won the right to British citizenship.

In 2000, representatives of the Chagossians came from Mauritius and the Seychelles to pursue a case against the then Labour government of Tony Blair, whose foreign secretary Robin Cook had supported them when in opposition and famously espoused an “ethical foreign policy,” over their illegal deportation.

When they won a historic ruling that agreed that the eviction was illegal, British government officials--duplicitous as ever--declared that the indigenous citizens were free to return but 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.

The British government will stop at nothing to protect its imperialist interests. In 2009, it unilaterally declared the Chagos Islands a Marine Protected Area (MPA), thereby outlawing fishing and the extractive industries, including oil and gas exploration. The MPA was deliberately created to prevent Chagossians from returning to their homeland by destroying their potential livelihoods.

WikiLeaks cables exposed this ruse in 2011. A Foreign Office official’s note stated that the creation of the MPA was “the most effective long-term way to prevent any of the Chagos Islands’ former inhabitants or their descendants from resettling in the BIOT [the Chagos Islands].”

In 2015, Mauritius won a ruling at the permanent court of arbitration at The Hague that stated Britain had acted illegally in the way it had exercised control over the Chagos Islands, criticizing London for failing to consult over establishing an MPA around the BIOT. But this did not change anything.

Last November, after years of delays, the British Foreign Office finally announced that Chagos islanders would not be given the right of return to resettle, arguing that the cost and US objections made it impossible. Furthermore, it would be economically unviable for them to do so, since the MPA had stripped them of their livelihoods, contradicting a recent independent government-commissioned consultation that confirmed the MPA could be maintained with just minor adjustments alongside a returned Chagossian population. Instead, the government offered a derisory £40 million “support,” equal to £4,000 per person.

None of this has stopped the government from harassing and issuing deportation orders against the islanders. In May, Chagossians demonstrated outside Taylor House in London to protest against the deportations that continue to plague many Chagossian families living in Britain.



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