

Britain reneges on resettling Chagossians on Diego Garcia and returning islands to Mauritius

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UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee last month that the resettlement of Chagossians back in their homeland, including on the island of Diego Garcia, was “not possible.”

In November 2022, the former foreign secretary, James Cleverly said that Britain was negotiating with Mauritius over the future of the Chagos Islands, including “resettlement of the former inhabitants of the Chagos archipelago,” while retaining control of Diego Garcia. Cameron’s statement caused shock and anger among the Chagossians who had welcomed Cleverly’s announcement as long overdue.

Cameron told the committee, “We face a very insecure and dangerous world and there is a need to maintain our security and strengthen our alliances to protect ourselves, and we should think of Diego Garcia in that context. It is an important national asset that we share with the Americans. Any negotiations we have with the Mauritians, the overriding question must be the security, safety and usability of this base. We must look at all risks that there could be in any change of circumstance and that is how we must proceed.”

His purpose is to ensure that the US’s military base on Diego Garcia, the largest island in the 60-plus Chagos Islands that lie halfway between Tanzania and Indonesia in the Indian Ocean, can continue to operate unimpeded. It also appears that London has dropped plans to hand the Chagos Islands back to Mauritius, citing “concerns” over its relations with China.

Cameron’s statement comes as the US and Britain have launched attacks on the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. The US has also conducted strikes in Syria and has not ruled out hitting targets inside Iran. This rapidly

expanding US-led war in the Middle East is part and parcel of the emerging global conflict involving Washington’s war against Russia in Ukraine and advanced military preparations targeting China. It is for this reason that the former prime minister, who held office from 2010 to 2016, was brought back into government, ennobled and appointed foreign secretary.

Diego Garcia houses one of the US’s largest airbases, with 4,000 US as well as British troops, which serves as a launching pad for its criminal operations in the Middle East. It played a crucial role during the Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War. Washington views it as essential for maintaining delicate military balance in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of the rise of China and escalating disputes in the South China Sea and for maintaining the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf. Britain allowed the CIA to use Diego Garcia as a “dark site,” where it detained and tortured people and refuelled extraordinary rendition flights, and recently extended the lease on the islands to 2036.

Therefore, the UK’s mooted decision to return the Chagos Islands was always dependent upon Washington. Without a green light from the Biden administration, London, even if willing, would not dare to return them. Hence the British government will supposedly only return the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius when “it is no longer required for defence purposes,” without indicating when that might be.

Britain’s purpose in granting Washington the 50-year lease on Diego Garcia in the 1960s—kept secret from both Parliament and the US Congress—was to secure an \$11 million discount on the US-made Polaris nuclear weapons system, which Labour had pledged to scrap

when in opposition. In 1973, the government forcibly removed the entire population of the Chagos Islands so that the US could establish a military base on Diego Garcia.

As Liseby Elyse, one of the Chagossians, who was 20-years-old and pregnant at the time, told the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in 2018, Britain shut down the islands' plantations and cut off food supplies. The Chagossians were told that they had to leave by ship by April 27, 1973 or slowly starve. She said, "We were like animals in that slave ship," adding, "People were dying of sadness." Her child was stillborn.

It was the investigative journalist, the late John Pilger, who first brought their plight to the world's attention with his film *Stealing a Nation* in 2004. The 2,000 Chagossians were exiled in Mauritius and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean and eventually the UK, where, denied support and compensation and subject to racial discrimination at the hands of officialdom, they have lived in impoverished conditions ever since. Some 50 years after expelling them, the British government finally announced in 2022 that the Chagossians could apply for British citizenship.

Ever ruthless and duplicitous in protecting Britain's imperialist interests, in 2009 Gordon Brown's Labour government 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, once again earning its publisher Julian Assange the British government's undying hatred.

The ICJ ruled that the separation of the islands from Mauritius, before it became independent in 1968 by Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1965, and their subsequent incorporation into the specially created British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT) violated the 1960 United Nations resolution 1514 banning the breakup of colonies before independence. The Court excoriated the UK's method of gaining control over the islands as coercive and the removal of the residents to make way for the US base as "shameful" and urged the UK to end "its administration of the Chagos Islands as rapidly as possible."

While the overwhelming majority of the UN General Assembly supported the ICJ, Britain with its customary imperial arrogance and hypocrisy—it routinely invokes the importance of international law against its foes—refused to accept the ICJ's rulings and the UN decision.

This was not the first time Britain had defied the UN. In February 2016, Britain rejected a UN human rights panel ruling that WikiLeaks founder Assange—who sought asylum inside the Ecuadorean embassy in London due to his persecution by the Swedish and British authorities—had been subjected to "arbitrary detention." This is in line with a broader assault, led by the US, on the institutional arrangements established in the aftermath of World War II viewed as an unacceptable constraint on the pursuit of predatory imperialist interests.

Following the ICJ's ruling and the UN vote against Britain, Mauritius took the case to the UN International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea in Hamburg, which in 2021 likewise confirmed the legitimacy of Mauritius's claim to the Chagos Islands, calling Britain's continuing administration of the islands "unlawful", and criticised its failure to hand the islands back. The ruling implies that the UK's leasing of Diego Garcia to the US is also illegal.

Britain is determined to hold onto its remaining 14 colonial possessions and to support the US, which has five, in pursuit of their predatory geostrategic interests. It fears claims from the Mauritian government for compensation and the implications for other sovereignty disputes, including with Spain over Gibraltar and Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas.

Cameron's statement exposes once again the hypocrisy of the British government that has lambasted China for its abuse of democratic rights in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, while it uses humanitarianism as a pretext for wars waged in pursuit of its sordid commercial interests.



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