

# Starmer's filthy Chagos Islands deal preserves Diego Garcia as key US-UK military base

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Last week, after six decades of acrimonious legal battles, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government agreed to hand over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. Far from remedying a longstanding injustice, it is a filthy deal that rides roughshod over the rights of the Chagossian islanders in the geopolitical interests of British imperialism.

The deal is aimed at securing the future of Diego Garcia, the largest of the 58 islands that hosts US-UK bomber bases in the Indian Ocean, which Washington views as crucial for policing the Indo-Pacific region against China and the sea routes from the Persian Gulf—the source of vital energy supplies.

Strategically located between East Africa and Southeast Asia, Diego Garcia serves as a surveillance centre for the Middle East. It was critical to air operations during the US-UK's criminal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Britain allowed the CIA to use Diego Garcia as a "dark site," where it detained and tortured people and refuelled extraordinary rendition flights. It recently extended the lease on the islands to 2036.

Under the terms of the deal, to be set out in a treaty, the UK will hand over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius but retain Diego Garcia under an "initial" 99-year lease in return for annual indexed-linked payments. Starmer and Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth issued a joint statement saying they were committed "to ensure the long-term, secure and effective operation of the existing base on Diego Garcia which plays a vital role in regional and global security".

The treaty would also "address wrongs of the past and demonstrate the commitment of both parties to support the welfare of Chagossians" who were forcibly relocated decades ago. The UK will provide financial support to enable Mauritius to resettle Chagossians, but the deal specifically excludes resettlement on Diego Garcia where most of the Islanders came from.

In 1965, Britain's Labour government separated Diego Garcia and the 58 Chagos Islands from Mauritius before it

became independent in 1968 and subsequently incorporated the Islands into the specially created British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT), administered from London. This violated the 1960 United Nations Resolution 1514 banning the breakup of colonies before independence.

Britain forcibly expelled Diego Garcia's 2,000 indigenous people—the Chagossians—to build the military base in exchange for a \$14 million discount on the UK purchase of US Polaris nuclear missiles, equivalent to around £127 million today. Mauritius was paid some \$8.4 million (\$90 million today) in compensation. The Chagossians were exiled to slums in Mauritius and the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean and eventually the UK, where, denied support and compensation, they have lived in impoverished conditions ever since, with many since dying. The British government has repeatedly rejected their demands to return to their homeland.

For years, Britain dismissed the various court rulings on the islanders' right to return home. In 2019, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion noting that "the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed" and that the UK had violated United Nations resolutions that prohibited the breaking up of colonies before granting independence. In his book *The Last Colony*, Philippe Sands, who consulted on the Chagossians' 40-year legal case, wrote that neither the ICJ nor the UN General Assembly had the power to force the UK and US to comply with international laws.

In November 2022, the Conservative government started negotiations 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. But earlier this year, amid the rapidly spiralling US-inspired and led Israeli war in the Middle East, then Foreign Secretary David Cameron told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee that the resettlement of Chagossians would not be possible.

The incoming Labour government has now stitched up a rotten, face-saving deal with Mauritius. Speaking in the House of Commons on Monday, Foreign Secretary David Lammy said, “The status quo was clearly not sustainable,” and “A binding judgment against the UK seemed inevitable.” The agreement he stressed had secured a “vital military base” and guaranteed Britain’s “long-term relationship with Mauritius, a close Commonwealth partner.”

Thursday’s deal was welcomed by the White House, the African Union and India. New Delhi has the strongest trade ties and family links with Mauritius and is part of the Quad alliance, along with Australia, Japan and the US, to counter China in the Pacific region. It has built an airstrip and a jetty on the Mauritian island of Agaléga for what is expected to be an Indian naval military facility to challenge China in the Indian Ocean, amid deteriorating relations with the Maldives.

While Chagossians will be allowed to return to the impoverished islands of Peros Banhos and Salomon Atoll, few wish to do so. Most originate from Diego Garcia, the only island that has any reasonable chance of being habitable—and only after considerable investment—and are intent on securing financial reparations and their rights in the UK and elsewhere, something the deal does nothing to address. The British government has disbursed little of the £40 million “support package” announced in 2016.

Chagossian Voices, an activist group representing the Chagossians in Britain and elsewhere, denounced the deal they had learned about only from the media as a “betrayal.” It said, “The views of Chagossians, the Indigenous inhabitants of the islands, have been consistently and deliberately ignored and we demand full inclusion in the drafting of the treaty.” They accused the British and Mauritian governments of excluding them from the negotiations and protested outside Parliament Monday demanding the right to self-determination.

As the New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) explained, far from resolving the status of Islanders who were evicted from their homes, the exclusion of Diego Garcia from the deal continued “the crimes long into the future.” Clive Baldwin, HRW’s senior legal advisor, said, “It does not guarantee that the Chagossians will return to their homeland, appears to explicitly ban them from the largest island, Diego Garcia, for another century, and does not mention the reparations they are all owed to rebuild their future. The forthcoming treaty needs to address their rights, and there should be meaningful consultations with the Chagossians, otherwise the UK, US and now Mauritius will be responsible for a still-ongoing colonial crime.”

Former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, now expelled

and an independent MP, had earlier welcomed the deal, ludicrously declaring, “This long overdue settlement at last includes the right to return. A milestone for decolonisation.” Days later, Corbyn issued a letter to Lammy urging him to reconsider his “manifestly unfair” decision to exclude returns to Diego Garcia. He made the on-his-knees protestation that despite Lammy insisting on the importance of the US-UK military base, “it is unclear why this should deprive Chagossians of their right of return, since the base does not take up the whole island.”

Lammy also stressed that the new arrangements mean that the Chagos Islands can no longer be used as a “backdoor migration route” into Britain. This was a reference to the 56 Tamils as well as eight in Rwanda who, having fled persecution in Sri Lanka, were rescued when their boat ran into trouble by Royal Navy ships and brought to Diego Garcia. Since then, stuck in legal limbo, they have been incarcerated in abominable conditions while seeking asylum in Britain. A judgement on the case is expected soon.

Lammy has offered some of the Tamils a move to Romania, claiming that after six months they could be moved to the UK, with others being offered financial incentives to return to Sri Lanka where they face persecution. In future, Mauritius will take responsibility for any future migrants who arrive on the islands.

The deal with Mauritius has aroused furious and certainly exaggerated opposition from the opposition Conservative Party, citing fears it would “embolden nations like Argentina to press for control of the Falklands.” The Chagos Islands and the Malvinas/Falkland Islands are among the UK’s 15 contested colonial possessions that include Gibraltar and the Cayman Islands.



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