

# STEALING A NATION

A special report by John Pilger



itv



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**“ This film is a shocking, almost incredible story. A government calling itself civilised tricked and expelled its most vulnerable citizens so that it could give their homeland to a foreign power . . . Ministers and their officials then mounted a campaign of deception all the way up to the Prime Minister. ”**

John Pilger

**“ In this part of the world, except if we go back to the days of slavery and to the days of indentured labour, I can't remember anything of the sort happening. ”**

Cassam Uteem, former President of Mauritius.  
Stealing a Nation – ITV October 2004.

John Pilger beside a boat used in the  
expulsion of the Chagos Islanders.  
© ITV plc

## Introduction

**B**eginning in the late 1960s the British government removed the population of around 2,000 people from the Chagos islands in the Indian Ocean. This policy was pursued as quietly as possible to ensure minimal international attention. Subsequently, successive British governments over nearly four decades have maintained this policy by not disclosing the fact that the islanders were permanent inhabitants.



The depopulation was done at the behest of the United States government to make way for a military base on the largest island in the Chagos group – Diego Garcia. Diego Garcia is now a large US military base used as a launch pad for intervention in the Middle East, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq.

All the while, the Chagossians, most of whom have been living in exile in poverty, have been campaigning for proper compensation and for the right to return to their homeland. Their nation has been stolen; but their plight has been little reported on in the media and little analysed by academics.

The British government of Tony Blair delivered the latest blow to the hopes of the Chagossians in June 2004. After a long legal battle, the Chagossians had won an historic High Court ruling in 2000 allowing their return to the outlying islands in the Chagos group, but later the same day the Government announced that they would not be allowing them to return to Diego Garcia. In 2004, the British government announced two "orders in council" to bar the Chagossians from returning even to the outlying islands, in effect, overturning the High Court ruling. Foreign Office minister Bill Rammell said that as a result of the new orders "no person has the right of abode in the territory or has unrestricted access to any part of it".

The Chagossians in exile now number around 4,500. Many are old and frail and want little more than to revisit their homeland to find their final resting-place. For all of them, their struggle is for basic justice and for a redress to the wrongs done to them.

# Creating a new colony

**D**uring the 1960s, when many countries were undergoing a process of decolonisation, Britain created a new colony – the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) – in November 1965. This included the Chagos island group, which was detached from Mauritius, and other small islands detached from the Seychelles. As an inducement to Mauritius, and as part of the discussions with Britain on independence, Britain offered £3 million as compensation for the loss of the Chagos islands.

In December 1965, UN Resolution 2066XX passed by the General Assembly called on the UK "to take no action which would dismember the territory of Mauritius and to violate its territorial integrity". However, Britain defied this and the Mauritian government, whose politicians were divided over the British offer, eventually accepted it. The BIOT was created, while Mauritius proceeded to independence in 1968.

In December 1966, the British government of Harold Wilson signed a military agreement with the US leasing Diego Garcia to it for an initial 50 years for military purposes. This deal, which still stands today, was not debated in parliament and attracted virtually no publicity. The reason for US interest was that the Pentagon had selected Diego Garcia as an ideal place to monitor the activities of the Soviet Navy and had ideas about turning it into a military facility. The US also made clear that it did not want people living on the island and therefore turned to Britain to remove them.

Britain subsequently depopulated the Chagos islands. This was later described by the Chagossians' defence lawyers as:

**“ the compulsory and unlawful removal of a small and unique population, citizens of the UK and Colonies, from islands that had formed their home, and also the home of the parents, grandparents and very possibly earlier ancestors”.<sup>2</sup> ”**

The islanders were expelled, most to Mauritius but some to the Seychelles, without any workable resettlement scheme, left in poverty and given no compensation, and were otherwise forgotten about by the British government.

Almost nothing was known of their plight until 1975, when some aspects of the affair surfaced in investigations by a US Congressional Committee, but by which time all of the inhabitants had been removed. Yet ever since, the Chagossians have refused to remain silent and have campaigned for the right to return and for adequate compensation.

Oliver Bancoult, the chair of the Chagos Refugees Group and leader of the Chagossians in exile, has said that:

**“ We believe that if the British public had known of these unlawful deportations at the time, we would probably still be living on the islands now. There is a lesson for our community, that we must learn to stand on our own feet and insist that we are consulted during the process leading to our return. We must never again rely on governments to tell us what we should have or not have”.<sup>3</sup> ”**

## The geography of the Chagos Islands

**T**he Chagos islands are among the most remote in the world, situated in the Indian Ocean 1,200 miles northeast of Mauritius. They cover an area of ocean of 54,400 km<sup>2</sup> and comprise many atolls, islands and submerged banks. Their land area is only 60 km<sup>2</sup> with the largest island, Diego Garcia, being horseshoe-shaped and 14 by 4 miles wide.

The outer islands consist of the atolls of Peros Banhos and Salomon, lying around 300km north of Diego Garcia. These comprise 35 small islands with a total land area of 1,200 hectares; the largest of these islands being 140 hectares in size. The Chagos Islands are noted for their great natural beauty, high species biodiversity and rich marine and terrestrial habitats. They have a benign maritime climate, with an average temperature of 27° C.



# A brief Chagossian history – until 1965

**H**uman settlement on the Chagos Islands dates back to the mid-1780s when a French sugar and coconut plantation owner from Mauritius, or Ile de France as it was then called, established a coconut plantation.

Worked on by dozens of Mozambican and Malagasy slaves, the plantation prospered, sending a large quantity of copra back to Mauritius. Seabirds,

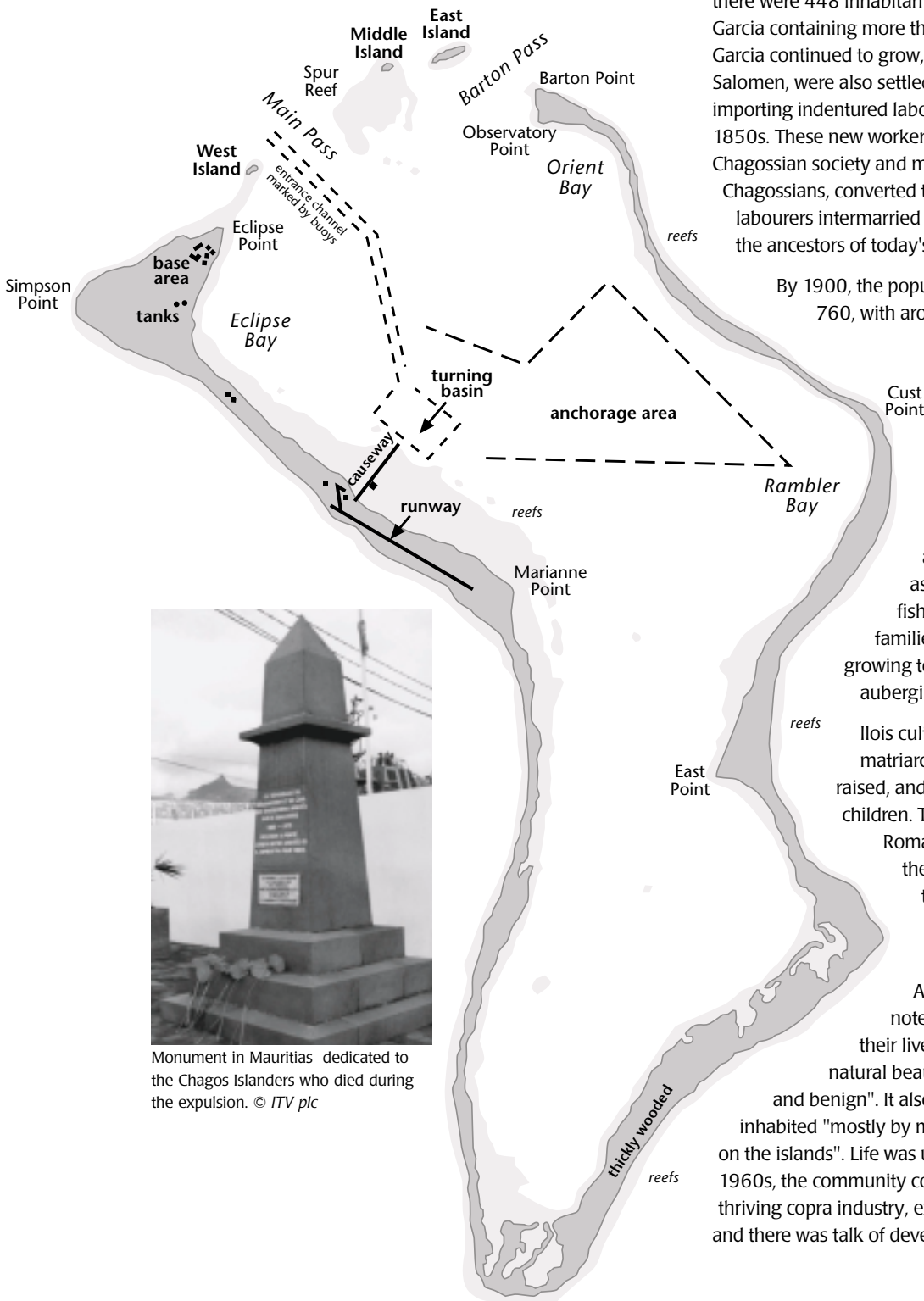
salted fish, wood and tortoise began to be exported from Diego Garcia, principally to other Indian Ocean islands. Between the late 1780s and 1828 the islands temporarily became a leper colony, hosting sufferers from Mauritius; by the end of the 18th century, the leper colony numbered around 300 people.

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Chagos islands passed from French to British rule; 20 years later, slavery was abolished, followed by abolition of the leper colony. In 1828, there were 448 inhabitants on the Chagos islands with Diego Garcia containing more than half. As the population on Diego Garcia continued to grow, the other islands, Peros Banhos and Salomen, were also settled as the plantation owners began importing indentured labourers from India in the 1840s and 1850s. These new workers gradually integrated into Chagossian society and many of them, along with the Chagossians, converted to Catholicism. Many of the Indian labourers intermarried with the inhabitants thus becoming the ancestors of today's Chagossians.

By 1900, the population of the islands reached around 760, with around 500 on Diego Garcia. The latter had three copra factories, a church, hospital, and a coaling station for ships crossing the Indian Ocean. A copra company had been established providing living quarters for the Ilois, as the people had become known, while the men who harvested the coconuts received a small wage or payment in kind, such as rice, oil and milk. Copra workers fished in their off-duty hours and most families cultivated small vegetable gardens, growing tomatoes, chillis, pumpkin and aubergines, and reared chicken and ducks.

Ilois culture developed into a pronounced matriarchal society, in which the women raised, and had the greater say over, the children. The main religion on the islands was Roman Catholic and by the early years of the 20th century a distinct variation of the Creole language had been developed, which few outsiders could understand.

A British colonial film shot in the 1950s noted that the people of the islands "lived their lives in surroundings of wonderful natural beauty and in conditions most tranquil and benign". It also stated that the islands were inhabited "mostly by men and women born and brought up on the islands". Life was undoubtedly hard but by the early 1960s, the community could boast a settled population, a thriving copra industry, exports of guano, used for phosphate and there was talk of developing a tourist industry.



Monument in Mauritius dedicated to the Chagos Islanders who died during the expulsion. © ITV plc

# Depopulating the islands

**T**hen British foreign policy intervened. A variety of techniques were used to remove the inhabitants.

It had long been the custom of the Chagossians to visit Mauritius to see relatives, to buy consumer goods or to obtain medical supplies and treatment that were unavailable on the Chagos islands. Some islanders, after visiting Mauritius, were simply – and suddenly – told by British officials they were not allowed back, meaning they were stranded, turned into exiles overnight. Many of the islanders later testified to having been tricked into leaving Diego Garcia by being offered a free trip. Some Chagossians claim they were deceived into believing what awaited them. Olivier Bancoult said that the islanders "had been told they would have a house, a portion of land, animals and a sum of money, but when they arrived (in Mauritius) nothing had been done"<sup>4</sup>.



John Pilger with Cassam Uteem, former President of Mauritius and champion of the Chagos Islanders. © ITV plc

Britain exerted pressure in other ways. In 1967, the BIOT bought out the sole employer of labour on the islands, Chagos Agalega, which ran the copra plantations, for around £750,000. It then closed down the copra activities between 1968 and 1973. A Foreign Office note from 1972 states that "when BIOT formed, decided as a matter of policy not to put any new investment into plantations" (sic), but to let them run down. The colonial authorities even cut off food imports to the Chagos islands;<sup>5</sup> it appears that after 1968 food ships did not sail to the islands. All this increased the pressure, and need, to leave.

As the Chagossians were moved out, the Americans moved in. The first US servicemen arrived on Diego Garcia in March 1971. Six months later, the last Chagossian left Diego Garcia. One of the victims recalled:

**“ We were assembled in front of the manager's house and informed that we could no longer stay on the island because the Americans were coming for good. We didn't want to go. We were born here. So were our fathers and forefathers who were buried in that land.”**<sup>6</sup>

**“ I came here (Mauritius) to treat my baby and then return home. Afterwards the administrator tapped me on the shoulder and told me 'Very sorry for you, Rita. Your island has been sold. You will never return here again'. My husband was sitting in a chair looking at my face. His two arms fell like this and he suffered a stroke. His arms and mouth were paralysed. They picked him up and took him to the hospital where he died.”**

Rita Bancoult, *Stealing a Nation* – ITV October 2004.

Most were moved first to the outlying islands of Peros Banhos and Salomen, where some 800 lived for two years. But in 1973 the British decided on a complete depopulation of the outlying islands as well, in response to Pentagon insistence on a clean sweep of the entire area. The BIOT arranged for its own ship, the Nordvaer, to take the last Chagossians to Mauritius.

The Nordvaer provided harsh conditions for the deportees with limited sleeping accommodation and cramped conditions for the long journey. The Chagossians were forced to leave behind their furniture, bought with hard-earned money on the plantations, and were only able to take with them a minimum of personal possessions, packed into a small crate.

Once in Mauritius, many of the Chagossians walked bewildered off the ship and tramped through the slums of the capital, Port Louis, to try to find a relative or friend who would take them in.



The Nordvaers. © ITV plc

**“ On the ship no matter how many children you had you were only given one mattress. All of us Chagossians, women, children, it was ourselves who were the animals on the Nordvaer.”**

Lizette Tallatte, *Stealing a Nation* – ITV October 2004.

# The Whitehall conspiracy: Uncovering the secret British files

“ The object of the exercise was to get some rocks which will remain ours. ”

Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, secret file of 1966

**G**overnment policy files, which are generally declassified after 30 years, are housed in the National Archives at Kew, south-west London. They consist of correspondence between government departments and embassies and stations abroad. In the case of the Chagos Islands, they reveal the concerns and priorities of British ministers and officials in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They also reveal the beginnings of a Whitehall strategy, which continued into the 21st century.

The Colonial Office stated that the "prime object of BIOT exercise was that the islands . . . hived off into the new territory should be under the greatest possible degree of UK control (sic)". The islanders were to be "evacuated as and when defence interests require this", against which there should be "no insurmountable obstacle", the Foreign Office stated.<sup>7</sup>

Secrecy was seen as vital. A Foreign Office "memorandum of guidance" of May 1964 noted that:

“ These steps (ie, the depopulation) should be ordered and timed to attract the least attention and should have some logical cover where possible worked out in advance. Even if these steps are taken with the utmost discretion and careful planning we must anticipate that they will become known and arouse suspicions as to their purpose. ”

Seven years later, a Foreign Office minute reads: "In the matter of the Illois, there may be an awkward problem of presentation. Meanwhile, the less said the better"<sup>8</sup>.

These formerly secret files show that the US wanted Diego Garcia to be cleared "to reduce to a minimum the possibilities of trouble between their forces and any 'natives'". This removal of the population "was made virtually a condition of the agreement when we negotiated it in 1965", in the words of one British official. Foreign Office officials recognised that they were open to "charges of dishonesty" and needed to "minimise adverse reaction" to US plans to establish the base. In secret, they referred to plans to "cook the books" and "old fashioned" concerns about "whopping fibs"<sup>9</sup>.

The Chagossians were described by a Foreign Office official in a secret file: "unfortunately along with the birds go a few Tarzans and Man Fridays who are hopefully being wished on Mauritius". Another official wrote, referring to a UN body on women's issues: "There will be no indigenous population except seagulls who have not yet got a committee (the status of women committee does not cover the rights of birds)". According to the

Foreign Office, "these people have little aptitude for anything other than growing coconuts". The Governor of the Seychelles noted that it was "important to remember what type of people" the islanders are: "extremely unsophisticated, illiterate, untrainable and unsuitable for any work other than the simplest labour tasks of a copra plantation"<sup>10</sup>.

## Population, what population?

“ We would not wish it to become general knowledge that some of the inhabitants have lived on Diego Garcia for at least two generations. ”

Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, secret file of 1966

Whitehall officials' strategy is revealed to have been "to present to the outside world a scenario in which there were no permanent inhabitants on the archipelago". One official stated:

“ The Colonial Office is at present considering the line to be taken in dealing with the existing inhabitants of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). They wish to avoid using the phrase 'permanent inhabitants' in relation to any of the islands in the territory because to recognise that there are any permanent inhabitants will imply that there is a population whose democratic rights will have to be safeguarded and which will therefore be deemed by the UN to come within its purlieu. (The solution will be) to issue them with documents making it clear that they are 'belongers' of Mauritius and the Seychelles and only temporary residents of BIOT. This device, though rather transparent, would at least give us a defensible position to take up at the UN. ”

One official noted that British strategy towards the Chagossians should be to "grant as few rights with as little formality as possible". In particular, Britain wanted to avoid fulfilling its obligations to the islanders under the UN charter.<sup>12</sup>

From 1965, memoranda issued by the Foreign Office and Commonwealth Relations Office, as it was then called, to British embassies around the world mentioned the need to avoid all reference to any "permanent inhabitants". Various memos noted that: "best wicket . . . to bat on . . . that these people are Mauritians and Seychellois (sic)"; "best to avoid all references to permanent inhabitants"; and the need to "present a reasonable argument based on the proposition that the inhabitants . . . are merely a floating population". The Foreign Office legal adviser noted in 1968 that "we are able to make up the rules as we go along and treat inhabitants of BIOT as not 'belonging' to it in any sense".<sup>13</sup>

Then Labour Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart wrote to Prime Minister Harold Wilson in a secret note in 1969 that "we could continue to refer to the inhabitants generally as essentially

migrant contract labourers and their families". It would be helpful "if we can present any move as a change of employment for contract workers . . . rather than as a population resettlement". The purpose of the Foreign Secretary's memo was to secure Wilson's approval to clear the whole of the Chagos islands of their inhabitants. This, the Prime Minister did, five days later on 26 April. By the time of this formal decision, however, the removal had already effectively started – Britain had in 1968 already started refusing to return Chagossians who were visiting Mauritius or the Seychelles.<sup>14</sup>

A Foreign Office memo of 1970 stated:

“ We would not wish it to become general knowledge that some of the inhabitants have lived on Diego Garcia for at least two generations and could, therefore, be regarded as 'belongers'. We shall therefore advise ministers in handling supplementary questions about whether Diego Garcia is inhabited to say there is only a small number of contract labourers from the Seychelles and Mauritius engaged in work on the copra plantations on the island. That is being economical with the truth.”

It continued:

“ Should a member (of the House of Commons) ask about what should happen to these contract labourers in the event of a base being set up on the island, we hope that, for the present, this can be brushed aside as a hypothetical question at least until any decision to go ahead with the Diego Garcia facility becomes public.”

A secret document signed by Michael Stewart in 1968, said: "By any stretch of the English language, there was an indigenous population, and the Foreign Office knew it". One Whitehall document was entitled: "Maintaining the Fiction". A Foreign Office legal adviser wrote in January 1970 that it was important "to maintain the fiction that the inhabitants of Chagos are not a permanent or semi-permanent population"<sup>16</sup>.

Eleanor Emery, a member of the British High Commission in Canada, stated in a secret file of 1970:

“ We shall continue to say as little as possible to avoid embarrassing the United States administration . . . Apart from our overall strategic and defence interests, we are also concerned at present not to have to elaborate on the administrative implications for the present population on Diego Garcia of the establishment of any base there . . . We would not wish it to become general knowledge that some of the inhabitants have lived on Diego Garcia for at least two generations and

could, therefore, be regarded as 'belongers'. We shall advise ministers in handling supplementary questions (ie, in Parliament) . . . to say that there is only a small number of contract labourers from the Seychelles and Mauritius engaged to work on the copra plantations. Should an MP ask about what would happen to these contract labourers in the event of a base being set up on the island, we hope that, for the present, this can be brushed aside as a hypothetical question at least until any decision to go ahead with the Diego Garcia facility becomes public.”

### Disappearing British citizens

Another concealed issue was the fact that the Chagossians were "citizens of the UK and the colonies". Britain preferred to designate them as in effect Mauritians so that they could be left to the Mauritian authorities to deal with. Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart warned in 1968 of the "possibility . . . (that) some of them might one day claim a right to remain in the BIOT by virtue of their citizenship of the UK and the Colonies". A Ministry of Defence note in the same year states that it was "of cardinal importance that no American official . . . should inadvertently divulge" that the islanders have dual nationality.<sup>18</sup>

Britain's High Commission in Mauritius noted in January 1971, before a meeting with the Mauritian Prime Minister, that:

“ Naturally, I shall not suggest to him that some of these have also UK nationality . . . always possible that they may spot this point, in which case, presumably, we shall have to come clean (sic).”

In 1971 the Foreign Office was saying that it was "not at present HMG's policy to advise 'contract workers' of their dual citizenship" nor to inform the Mauritian government, referring to "this policy of concealment"<sup>19</sup>. The defence lawyers for the Chagossians have stated that:

“ Concealment is a theme which runs through the official documents, concealment of the existence of a permanent population, of BIOT itself, concealment of the status of the Chagossians, concealment of the full extent of the responsibility of the United Kingdom government . . . concealment of the fact that many of the Chagossians were Citizens of the UK and Colonies . . . This concealment was compounded by a continuing refusal to accept that those who were removed from the islands in 1971-3 had not exercised a voluntary decision to leave the islands.”

Indeed, the lawyers argue, "for practical purposes, it may well be that the deceit of the world at large, in particular the United Nations, was the critical part" of the government's policy.<sup>20</sup>

# Chagossians in exile: Poverty and protest

“ When I was living on Diego  
I was like a beautiful bird in the sky  
Since I've been in Mauritius  
We are living a worthless life  
Help me my friend, help me to sing  
to send our message to the world. ”

Chagossian song. Stealing a Nation – ITV October 2004.

**M**ost of the islanders ended up living in the slums of the Mauritian capital, Port Louis, in gross poverty; many were housed in shacks, most of them lacked enough food, and some died of starvation and disease. Some committed suicide due to the apparent hopelessness of their situation. A survey in 1980 by the Comite Illois Organisation Fraternelle, a Chagossian support organisation in Mauritius, listed 9 cases of suicide and that 26 families had died together in poverty. “The causes mostly”, it noted, “are unhappiness, non-adoption of Ilois within the social framework of Mauritius, extreme poverty, particularly lack of food, house, jobs”. A report commissioned by the Mauritian government in the early 1980s found that only 65 of 94 Ilois householders were owners of land and houses; and 40 per cent of adults had no job.<sup>21</sup>

Lizette Tallatte  
© ITV plc



In 1973 Britain offered £650,000 in compensation, which arrived too late to offset the hardship of the islanders. Each adult was given 7,590 rupees (about £650) and children between 356-410 rupees, depending on their age. In 1976, the government said that the compensation “represented a full and final discharge of HMG's obligations”. The Foreign Office stated in a secret file that “we must be satisfied that we could not discharge our obligation . . . more cheaply”. The Chagossians' defence lawyers argue that “the UK government knew at the time that the sum given (in compensation) would in no way be adequate for resettlement”.<sup>22</sup>

Ever since their removal, the islanders have campaigned for proper compensation and for the right to return. In 1975, for example, they presented a petition to the British High Commission in Mauritius. It said:

“ We, the inhabitants of the Chagos islands – Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon – have been uprooted from these islands because the Mauritius government sold the islands to the British government to build a base. Our ancestors were slaves on those islands but we know that we are the heirs of those islands. Although we were poor we were not dying of hunger. We were living free . . . Here in Mauritius . . . we, being mini-slaves, don't get anybody to help us. We are at a loss not knowing what to do. ”<sup>23</sup>

Four hundred and twenty-two families signed the petition, also indicating their wish to return home. The response of the British was to tell the islanders to address their petition to the Mauritian government. It was the same response as had greeted a similar petition the previous year, when the British had stated that the “High Commission cannot intervene between yourselves as Mauritians and government of Mauritius, who assumed responsibility for your resettlement”.<sup>24</sup> Yet the British government knew that many of the Chagossians could claim nationality “of the UK and the colonies”.

In June 1978 several families, unable to find anywhere to live, held a protest in the public gardens of Port Louis. A few months later, a group of Chagossian women went on hunger strike for 21 days. At Christmas that year, four Chagossians were put in prison and fined for resisting the authorities pulling down their shacks. Support for the Chagossians gradually grew in Mauritius while the chief opposition party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien, became more involved in their cause.

One Chagossian, Michel Vencatessen, decided to fight back against the British actions by suing the government for wrongful dismissal from the islands. His cause was taken up by the well-known London solicitor Bernard Sheridan, who was also asked by the Chagossians to negotiate with the British government about improved compensation. According to one analysis, the British government apparently told Sheridan that it would increase its compensation offer if Vencatessen dropped his



## Whitehall in denial – the 1980s and 1990s

case.<sup>25</sup> In 1979, Britain offered a further £1.25 million in compensation, insisting that this was available only if the Chagossians agreed to a "no return" clause. These terms were rejected.

A campaign was launched in Mauritius to expel the US military from the Chagos islands and a series of hunger strikes was staged by the Chagossians, as their situation became increasingly desperate. From September 1980 to March 1981 mainly Chagossian women squatted, sang and went hungry to try to obtain better terms from the British. In this context, and with further pressure from the Mauritian government, further talks were held in London in March 1982, after which the British government agreed to pay £4 million in compensation. This sum was distributed to 1,344 identified islanders who each received little over £2,000. The individual share-out also meant that there was insufficient funds for a job creation scheme. This was a major problem for the Chagossians, 60 per cent of whom were unemployed, with most of the rest in temporary jobs, in the context of then economic difficulties in Mauritius. Richard Gifford, the current lawyer for the Chagossians, notes

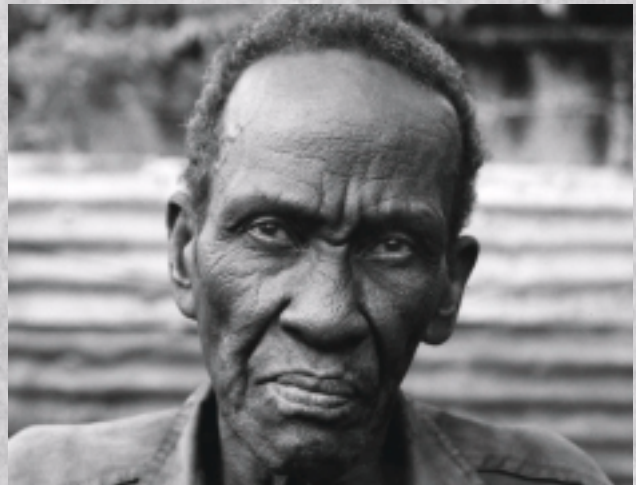
“ Some of them managed to get rudimentary housing or a small plot of land but many simply paid off their debts and carried on living in squalor as before. As a condition of receiving the money, they were obliged to sign highly detailed legalistic forms written in English renouncing all rights against the UK government including the claim to return to their islands. These forms were not explained or translated and when the money was disbursed, the Chagossians were required merely to put their thumb print to a piece of paper which they thought was a mere form of receipt. The islanders vigorously deny that by doing so, they knew they were giving up their rights to return to Chagos or to seek further compensation.”<sup>26</sup>

A 1981 report established that 77 per cent of Chagossian adults wish to return to their homelands.<sup>27</sup> It was to be nearly twenty years of further campaigning before the Chagossians secured a major success on this front.

Today, most Chagossians remain on the margins of Mauritian society, socially excluded and extremely poor. Living conditions for many families remain cramped and inadequate to cope with the extremes of heat and rain that characterise the country's climate. The unemployment rate for the Chagossians is 60 per cent compared with the national average of 4 per cent, while 45 per cent are illiterate compared to 15 per cent for Mauritius as a whole. Excluded from work, education and the possibility of a decent livelihood, many younger members of the community have turned to negative coping strategies: the national problems of drug abuse and alcoholism are much worse among the Chagossians, prostitution is rife and suicide rates are high.

**The heart of British policy – that the Chagossians were not permanent inhabitants of their islands – was maintained by governments from the 1960s. One formula designated them as "former plantation workers". For example, Margaret Thatcher told the House of Commons in 1990 that:**

“ Those concerned worked on the former copra plantations in the Chagos archipelago. After the plantations closed between 1971 and 1973 they and their families were resettled in Mauritius and given considerable financial assistance. Their future now lies in Mauritius.”<sup>28</sup>



Louis Onezime – A Chagos Islander in Exile. © ITV plc

Foreign Office minister William Waldegrave said in 1989 that he recently met "a delegation of former plantation workers from the Chagos Islands", before asserting that they "are increasingly integrated into the Mauritian community". Foreign Office minister Baroness Chalker, responsible for British aid policy, also told the House that "the former plantation workers (Ilois) are now largely integrated into Mauritian and Seychellese society".<sup>29</sup>

Ministers were not forthcoming in revealing the British role in the removal of the Chagossians. For example, Foreign Office minister Richard Luce wrote to an MP in 1981, in response to a letter from one of his constituents, that the islanders had been "given the choice of either returning (to Mauritius or the Seychelles) or going to plantations on other islands in BIOT" (sic). According to this letter, the "majority chose to return to Mauritius and their employers . . . made the arrangements for them to be transferred".<sup>30</sup>

A Foreign Office memorandum of 1980 recommended to the then Foreign Secretary that "no journalists should be allowed to visit Diego Garcia" and that visits by MPs be kept to a minimum to keep out those "who deliberately stir up unwelcome questions".<sup>31</sup>

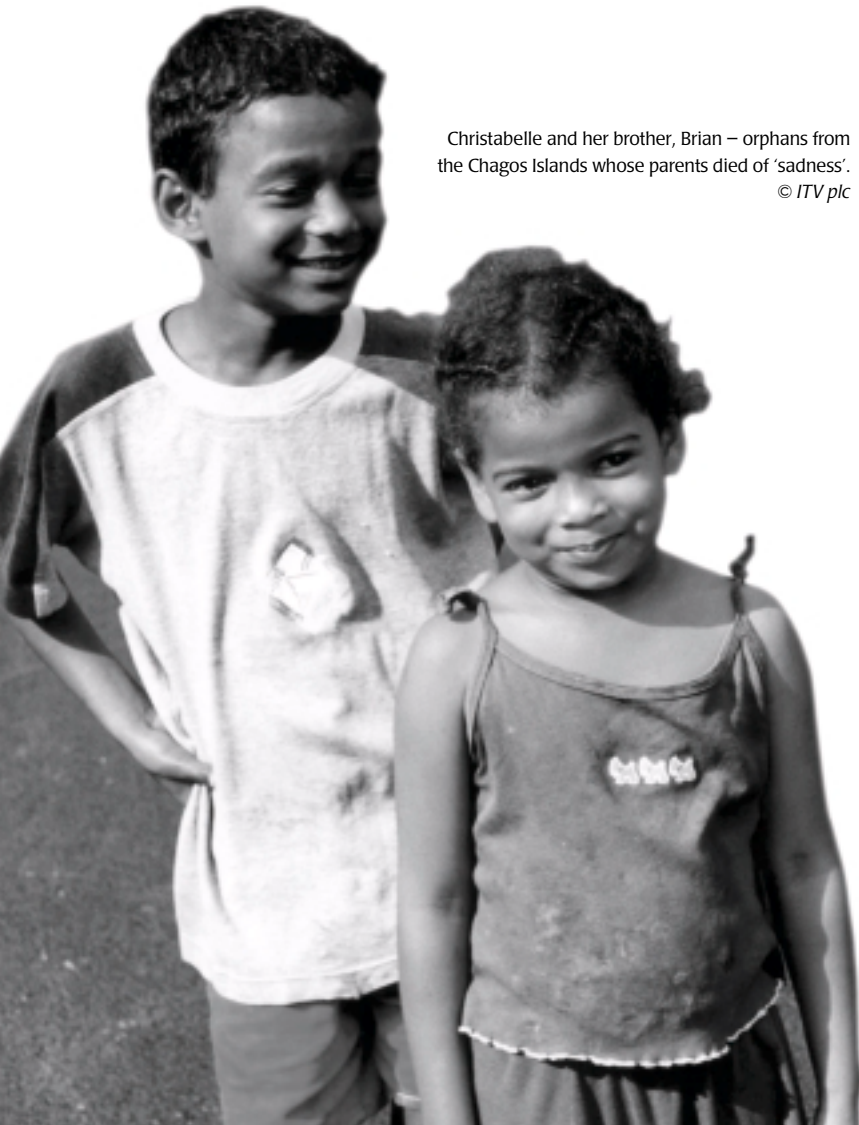
# The New Labour years

“ The position of Diego Garcia as a base – that is what this is about – is extremely important for this country, as it represents an important part of our security. ”<sup>32</sup>

Tony Blair

**U**ntil 2003, the Foreign Office website contained a country profile of the British Indian Ocean Territory stating that there were "no indigenous inhabitants". However, in 2004 this wording changed; the website now states that following the detachment of the Chagos islands from Mauritius and the Seychelles, "the settled inhabitants, some 1200 persons, were subsequently relocated" to these two countries.<sup>33</sup>

The Chagossians launched their new case against the British government in September 1998. By then, the government had outlined its position. The Chagossians' return "is not a realistic prospect", Foreign Office minister Tony Lloyd told the House of Commons in 1998. He added that "successive British governments have given generous financial assistance to help with the resettlement of the Ilois in Mauritius", referring to the pay-outs made in 1978 and 1982.<sup>34</sup>



Christabelle and her brother, Brian – orphans from the Chagos Islands whose parents died of 'sadness'.  
© ITV plc

In July 2000, Foreign Office minister Peter Hain said that:

“ The outer islands of the territory have been uninhabited for 30 years so any resettlement would present serious problems both because of the practical feasibility and in relation to our treaty obligations. ”<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, a Foreign Office memorandum to the House of Commons stated that resettlement of the outlying islands would be:

“ impractical and inconsistent with the existing defence facilities . . . Our position on the future of the territory will be determined by our strategic and other interests and our treaty commitments to the USA. ”

The memo did not refer to the government's obligations to the rights of the islanders as British Citizens.<sup>36</sup>

The Chagossians won a victory over the British government when the High Court ruled in November 2000 that "the wholesale removal" of the islanders was an "abject legal failure". A government ordinance subsequently allowed the Chagossians to return to the outlying islands in the group, although prevented their return to Diego Garcia itself.

“ After the first judgement in court we were very ecstatic. We thought that the British had some feelings after all. ”

Charlesia Alexis, *Stealing a Nation* – ITV October 2004.

“ When I won the victory I felt at ease. I thought I would return to my motherland and I would return to the cemetery where my ancestors are. I thought I would again see my lovely beaches and the beautiful sea where we were born. ”

Lizette Tallatte, *Stealing a Nation* – ITV October 2004.

On the same day Foreign Secretary Robin Cook passed a new immigration ordinance which provided that those born on the islands and their descendants had the right to return to all of the islands except Diego Garcia. Access to Diego Garcia "will continue to be controlled strictly and will be by permit only", the government later stated. The British and US navies continue to conduct sea and air patrols to exclude unwanted visitors.<sup>37</sup>

The High Court ruling did not produce a sea-change in the government's stance towards the Chagossians. Foreign Office minister John Battle told the House of Commons that the court case concerned only the settlement of the outer islands "not the rights and wrongs of the way in which the Ilois were removed".<sup>38</sup>

The government has also resisted providing further compensation. The lack of aid to the Chagossians contrasts starkly to that provided for other overseas territories, notably the Pitcairn islands. Two million Euros have been set aside by the EU in aid for Pitcairn's population of around four dozen. The British government has not hitherto asked the EU for any amount to help resettle the Chagossians.

The Foreign Office has consistently argued that resettlement on the islands is largely infeasible. In June 2002 a government-sponsored study on the feasibility of resettlement concluded:

**“ While it may be feasible to resettle the islands in the short-term, the costs of maintaining long-term inhabitation are likely to be prohibitive. Even in the short-term, natural events such as periodic flooding from storms and seismic activity are likely to make life difficult for a resettled population. ”**<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, a review of this study conducted for the Chagossians argued that resettlement is indeed feasible and that there would be adequate water, fish and other supplies, even with low levels of investment. This study states that "it is fatuous to suggest that the islands cannot be resettled" and that the conclusion of the government's feasibility study is "erroneous in every assertion". It also notes that the Chagos islands are indeed already successfully settled – by the US military.<sup>40</sup>

In June 2004, Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell announced the enactment of two "orders in council" in effect, overturning the High Court ruling and banning the Chagossians from returning to the outlying islands. The Minister stated that "these two orders restore the legal position to what it has been understood to be before the High Court decision of 3 November 2000". He gave the following reasons:

**“ Anything other than short-term resettlement on a purely subsistence basis would be highly precarious and would involve expensive underwriting by the UK government for an open-ended period – probably permanently. Accordingly, the government consider that there would be no purpose in commissioning any further study into the feasibility of resettlement; and that it would be impossible for the government to promote or even permit resettlement to take place. After long and careful consideration, we have therefore decided to legislate to prevent it. Equally, restoration of full immigration control over the entire territory is necessary to ensure and maintain the availability and effective use of the territory for defence purposes . . . Especially in the light of recent developments in the international security climate since the November 2000 judgement, this is a factor to which due weight has had to be given. ”**<sup>41</sup>



In response, the Chagossians lawyer, Richard Gifford, stated:

**“ I was obliged to inform the Minister that he was acting irrationally and in all probability illegally, and there would undoubtedly be a legal challenge to the validity of the Order in Council . . . The islanders, who have been treated in the most heartless way for a generation are desperate to get back to their homeland. Many of the older folk who were removed are dying, and it is a cynical disregard of their human rights to delay their resettlement in the hope that those with memories on the islands or ancestors buried there will die before they can go back home. There can hardly be a more shameful history of maltreatment of a population in modern times. ”**

**“ I don't feel ashamed because I took what I believe, and the government took, a responsible decision in the circumstances almost 40 years after the last Chagossian lived within these islands and I was being asked, and the government and the British taxpayer was being asked, to pick up the financial tab to allow almost on an exploratory basis for people to go back to the islands. You can't manufacture money. You actually have to make choices about how you spend your money. ”**

**“ Of course I've got sympathy for people based upon what happened to them and their families in the past. But this is today, almost 40 years after that event and for us and the British government and the British taxpayer, to be asked to finance that, when that money could actually alternatively go on alleviating aid and poor people throughout the world, that is the choice. ”**

Bill Rammell, Foreign Office Minister, *Stealing a Nation* – ITV October 2004.

# United States use of Diego Garcia

“ Amongst the various activities of the British and American governments in the twentieth century, not to mention the nineteenth century, this was a relatively small matter . . . It is being pinpointed now for reasons that I cannot ascribe to anything other than a quest for a certain publicity. ”

James Schlesinger, former CIA Director and US Defence Secretary  
Stealing a Nation – ITV October 2004.

## CHRONOLOGY

- **August 1964** – A joint US/UK military survey of the islands takes place.
- **December 1966** – British and US governments sign a military agreement leasing Diego Garcia to the US for military purposes.
- **March 1971** – First US military personnel arrive on Diego Garcia; construction of a US naval communications facility begins.
- **1972** – Further UK/US agreement to establish a communications facility on Diego Garcia. This allowed the US to construct and operate a naval communications facility on the island, with Britain assisting in manning the facility, and which began in 1973.
- **1974** – Britain approves US proposals for the development of the communications facility on Diego Garcia into a support facility of the US navy, which plans were incorporated into a new agreement in 1976.
- **1976** – An "exchange of notes" takes place allowing the extension of the runway (an 8,000 foot runway had by then already been built) as Diego Garcia is gradually turned into a fully-functioning US military base.
- **1980** – Especially after the Iranian revolution of 1979, "Diego Garcia saw the most dramatic build-up of any location since the Vietnam War era", according to the US Navy.<sup>42</sup> The US spends \$500 million on a construction programme, and prepositions equipment on the island for rapid deployment.
- **1991** – US bombers use Diego Garcia as a base to strike Iraq to eject the latter from its invasion of Kuwait.
- **1992** – the US uses Diego Garcia as a staging-post for its intervention in Somalia.
- **2001** – The Diego Garcia base is used by US bombers attacking Afghanistan.
- **2002** – Allegations in the US press that Diego Garcia is being used to interrogate "al-Qaeda suspects".
- **2003** – US bombers use Diego Garcia to strike Iraq.

It has emerged – though never been officially admitted – that the US paid Britain the equivalent of around £5 million for Diego Garcia in the mid-1960s. A 1967 Foreign Office memo to the US stated that "ultimately, under extreme pressure, we should have to deny the existence of a US contribution in any form, and to advise ministers to do so in (parliament) if necessary". This amount was deducted from the price the Wilson government paid the US for buying Polaris nuclear weapons.

Having insisted on depopulating the islands in the 1960s, the US remains strongly opposed to any resettlement now, even in the outlying islands. The evidence suggests that it has exerted pressure on the British government to prevent this. In late 2000, for example, the Guardian published a confidential letter from the State Department to the Foreign Office saying that such resettlement "would significantly downgrade the strategic importance of a vital military asset unique in the region". The US disclosed that it was seeking permission from Britain to expand its military base on Diego Garcia and to "develop the island as a forward operating location for expeditionary air force operations – one of only four such locations worldwide".<sup>43</sup>

Since the early 1970s, Diego Garcia has become increasingly important to US military strategy, notably as a base for intervention in the Middle East. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, this was never solely explicable in terms of Cold War rivalry. US interests in the region extended well beyond containing the Soviet threat to ensuring an "over the horizon" great power role in the region. Today, the US Navy describes the base as "strategically located in the middle of the Indian Ocean" and "operationally invaluable". It is argued by the US to have become more important in the "war on terror"; yet, it is its location as an intervention platform for more broadly projecting US power that explains its significance. Diego Garcia's role "has become increasingly important over the last decade in supporting peace and stability in the region", a Foreign Office spokesman claimed in 1997.<sup>44</sup>



The Harbour – Diego Garcia



Currently, Diego Garcia houses around 1,500 US military personnel, 2,000 civilian workers, mainly from Mauritius and the Philippines, and 40 UK military personnel. The latter are split between the Royal Navy and Royal Marines and they police the island and carry out the duties of customs officers under the overall command of a Royal Navy Commander. The island is described by the US Navy as a "military reservation" and all access is strictly restricted.<sup>45</sup>

The length of the runway is around two miles, adapted to take B2 nuclear-capable stealth bombers, while the lagoon is home to every type of US naval ship, from cruisers to tankers. The facilities on the island are extensive. There is a large electricity supply to desalinate up to a thousand tons of seawater a day, and to power all the air-conditioning, enough to satisfy a fair-sized city. Alongside the military installations are a chapel, a hospital, a bowling club, a nine-hole par-3 golf course, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a gym, a baseball diamond, a radio station, ice cream parlours and launderettes.

The official website of the US Navy on Diego Garcia boasts of "unbelievable recreational facilities and exquisite natural beauty":

“Facilities are always being established to meet both your professional and personal needs. Living and working conditions are outstanding . . . Recreational opportunities are numerous and we are constantly expanding facilities to make life more comfortable.”

“The State Party (ie, the United Kingdom government) should, to the extent still possible, seek to make exercise of the Ilois’ right to return to their territory practicable. It should consider compensation for the denial of this right over an extended period.”

United Nations, Human Rights Committee, Report on the UK, December 2001

**D**espite this position of the UN’s Human Rights Committee, the future of the Chagossians is uncertain and somewhat bleak. It is clear that the UK government’s use of legal mechanisms to block return to the islands, coupled with the US government’s commitment to maintain the base, are the most significant factors affecting the fate of the Chagossians.

Given the importance of Diego Garcia to its military strategy, the US government is likely to continue to exert pressure on London to maintain the base. Although there is provision to review the original 1966 US/UK agreement in 2016, it is currently unlikely that either London or Washington will wish to do, at least without stronger international pressure.

Chagossian hopes depend on whether governments at the United Nations will listen to current Chagossian lobbying and take up the issue more strongly. They also depend on the outcome of their current challenge to the government’s June 2004 legal decision and a complaint for a breach of human rights to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The future of the Chagossians also depends on citizens in the UK, and the degree to which they are able to communicate powerfully to the government that this is an issue of public concern.



Children at a Chagos Island demonstration. © ITV plc

## What you can do

- Write to your local MP or MEP. For MPs, urge them to sign Early Day Motion (EDM) 1355 which deplores the treatment of the Chagossians.
- Write to the Foreign Secretary, expressing your concern. Address: Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Foreign Secretary, King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH.
- Organize awareness-raising activities in your area, and write letters to the national and local media, to increase public understanding of the issue.
- Send messages of support to the Chagossians, to Olivier Bancoult, chair of the Chagos Refugees Group. Address: 62 Cassis Rd, Port Louis, Mauritius. Email: obancoult@intnet.mu.

## Further Information

- **The Ilois Support Trust** provides assistance to the Chagossian community in Mauritius and the Seychelles.  
**Website:** [www.iloistrust.org](http://www.iloistrust.org)  
53 Court Road • Caterham • Surrey CR3 5RJ  
**Registered charity** 1087561.  
**Email:** [administrator@iloistrust.org](mailto:administrator@iloistrust.org) • **Tel:** 01883-342902.
- **The UK Chagos Support Association** raises awareness and campaigns in the UK with and on behalf of the Chagossians.  
**Website:** [www.chagossupport.org.uk](http://www.chagossupport.org.uk)  
24 Baron Rd • Gee Cross • Cheshire SK14 5RW.  
**Chairman:** Paul Heaton.  
**Email:** [psheaton@onetel.com](mailto:psheaton@onetel.com)
- **The Chagos Refugees Group** is a registered voluntary organisation set up in 1983 to promote the interests of the Chagossians.  
**Website:** [www.chagos.org](http://www.chagos.org)  
62 Cassis Rd • Port Louis • Mauritius.  
**Email:** [obancoult@intnet.mu](mailto:obancoult@intnet.mu)
- **Foreign and Commonwealth Office**  
**Website:** [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)
- The official website of the **US Navy, Diego Garcia:** [www.dg.navy.mil](http://www.dg.navy.mil)

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The Chagos Island blacksmith in front of the Chagos Island flag. © ITV plc

## Further Reading

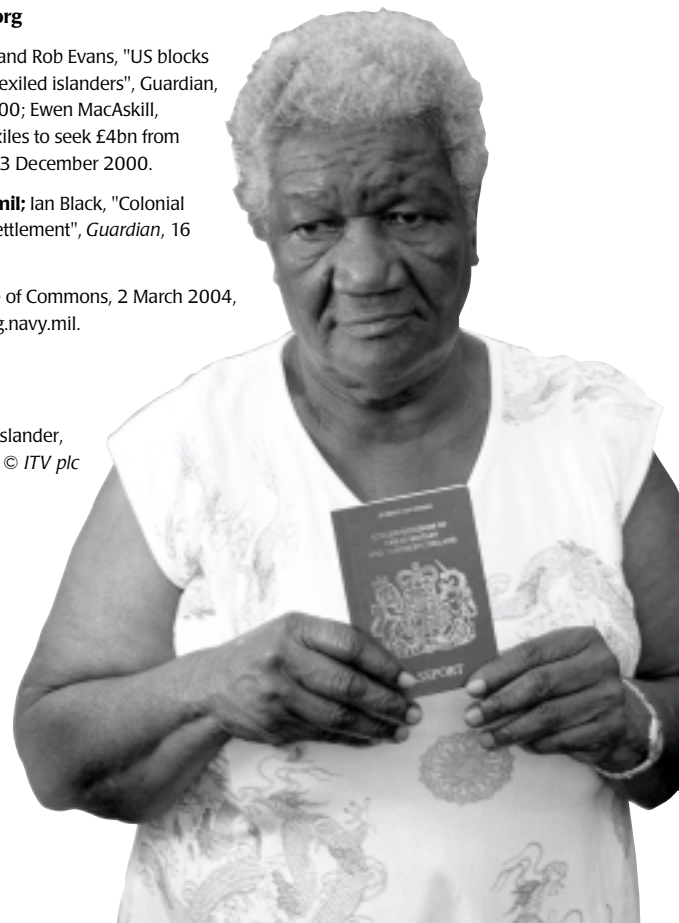
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- The official website of the **US Navy, Diego Garcia:** [www.dg.navy.mil](http://www.dg.navy.mil).

## The Author

Mark Curtis's most recent books are **Unpeople: Britain's Secret Human Rights Abuses** and **Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World**, both published by Vintage. He is the author of various books on British and US foreign policies, a former Research fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) and currently Director of the World Development Movement. His website is: [www.markcurtis.info](http://www.markcurtis.info). Email: [mcurtis30@aol.com](mailto:mcurtis30@aol.com).

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Charlesia, a Chagos islander, with British Passport. © ITV plc





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