Islanders expelled by Britain return 50 years on with anger still burning

Families forced to leave the Chagos Islands have returned as part of a campaign to have them handed back.

Christina Lamb

They came for the ships, took them up and gone. Then they came for the people. Carefully evicting them from their palm-fringed island homelands and shipping them thousands of miles away.

If these sound like the actions of a fascist regime or brutal dictatorship long gone in the past, think again. The Chagossians in the middle of the Indian Ocean are Britain’s last colony in Africa, and it is only now, 50 years on, that the UK is acknowledging its wrongdoing.

She is from Peros Banhos, one of the 55 white-sand coral islands that form the Chagos archipelago. It became a British possession in 1934 after the Dutch claimed it. It housed various French colonies until Britain, including Le de France, leased it by the British in Mauritius.

How Elysé and around 1,500 others lost their homes was revealed in The Sunday Times in a three-page story in 2017. Headlined “The islanders that Britain sold”, reporters described deportees “begging to survive” and living in “sheds with more than three coconuts” on a stripping island paradise, world power realities and insensitive muddling.

As representatives revealed a secret deal between US Britain and London, and the crimes inter alia, at the time, Sir David Wilson, to forcibly depopulate the islands and make the chain a British territory before gaining independence in Mauritius from which Chagos had been governed.

The British government claimed the islands were “unsuitable” and referred to those living there as “Man Fridays”, as they were ignorant contractors rather than people whose ancestors went back generations.

The largest of those islands was Diego Garcia, now one of America’s biggest military bases, Camp Justice, used in recent years to launch bombing raids on Iraq and Afghanistan. It also gained notoriety as a so-called “black site” to interrogate suspected al-Qaeda leaders about terrorism as a so-called “black site” to interrogate suspected al-Qaeda leaders about terrorism.

To refuse to allow a community to return was “a crime against humanity.”

To this day, the UK government has spent more than £750m to make sure the Chagossians never return. “It was a political stunt,” said Lord Alf Dubs, a former refugee. “A fascist ruse was exposed by Wikileaks.”

In 2019, the UN’s highest court, the International Court of Justice, declared the archipelago a marine reserve to try to avoid returning it. The islands would now be perfect high-end getaway destinations. Instead, “We had our traditions, culture, school, church. We worked in the copra plantation and lived off fresh fruit, vegetables

They were taken to Mauritius, where instead of the houses and gardens they had been promised they were housed in cramped and derelict estates by the docks. This lost the baby. Others complained: “We had a wonderful life,” said Elysé.

“We had our traditions, culture, school, church. We worked in the copra plantation and lived off fresh fruit, vegetables and fish. They are trying to make us non-Christians.”

To refuse to allow a community to return was “a crime against humanity.”

Lamb

Christina Lamb’s book is due to be published in April. www.christinamlamb.com

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