

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

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First they came for the dogs, rounding them up and gassing them. Then they came for the people, forcibly evicting them from their palm-fringed island homelands and dumping them thousands of miles away.

If those sound like the actions of a fascist regime or brutal dictatorship long in the past, think again. The Chagos Islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean are Britain's last colony in Africa, and it was the 1970s when the British removed the Creole population in a secret deal to make way for an American military base.

Despite court rulings and a United Nations demand supporting their return, the UK stills clings onto what it calls the Biot (British Indian Ocean Territory).

Liseby Elysé was almost 21, newly married, four months pregnant and living on what she saw as her "paradise island", when in 1973 her world came to a shuddering halt. Told that "the island is now closed", she and her husband, a blacksmith, were herded on to a cargo ship along with the rest of the population, each allowed just one suitcase. "It was the start of a nightmare," she said.

They were taken to Mauritius, where instead of the houses and gardens they had been promised they were housed in a cramped and derelict estate by the docks. She lost the baby. Others committed suicide or were forced into prostitution.

"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-people. They even gassed our dogs."

Yesterday a tearful Elysé set foot once again on the homeland from which she was separated almost 50 years ago. Wearing a T-shirt proclaiming "Everyone has the right to die on his birthplace", the grandmother, now 68, was hardly able to

contain her excitement at once again tasting the coconuts, and seeing the church where she married and the graveyard of her ancestors.

She is from Peros Banhos, one of the chain of 55 white-sand coral islands that form the Chagos archipelago. It became a British possession in 1814 after the Treaty of Paris ended the Napoleonic wars and ceded various French colonies to Britain, including Île de France, known by the British as Mauritius.

How Elysé and around 1,500 others lost their homes was revealed in The Sunday Times in a front-page story in 1975 headlined "The islanders that Britain sold". Reporters described deportees "begging to survive" and living in shacks "little more than chicken coops".

Describing it as a "story of desert island intrigue, world power rivalries and insensitive muddling", an investigation revealed a secret deal between US President Lyndon Johnson and the prime minister at the time, Harold Wilson, to forcibly depopulate the islands and make the chain a British territory before giving independence to Mauritius, from which Chagos had been governed.

The British government claimed the islands had no inhabitants and referred to those living there as "Man Fridays", as if they were transient contractors rather than people whose ancestors went back five 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 9/11, using torture such as waterboarding.

Elysé and four fellow Chagossians sailed to the islands last week on a voyage funded by Mauritius that, while ostensibly scientific, clearly had a political agenda: to put the issue on the map and embarrass the British government.

"It's a very emotional trip," said one of those aboard, Professor Philippe Sands QC, an international human rights barrister who has been counsel for Mauritius since 2010. "I grew up believing that Brit-



PHILIPPE SANDS



ain had a commitment to the rule of law, but the current British government is a lawless regime that has diminished its authority with its appalling behaviour.

"You can't just dismember part of a territory before giving it independence. To refuse to allow a community to return to their homes without a lawful case is a crime against humanity."

He accused the UK of double standards. "To me, what's the difference between the Falklands community and Chagos? The fact is, they are black."

With their sugar-soft beaches and groves of palms overlooking pristine seas, the islands would now be perfect high-end getaway destinations. Instead,

Wearing T-shirts for their cause, Chagossians arrive on a visit from Mauritius

most of the islanders live in poverty, given derisory compensation despite Foreign Office claims to be "currently delivering a £40 million support package to Chagossians over a ten-year period."

Three years ago the UN's highest court, the international court of justice, ruled unanimously that the UK unlawfully detached the Chagos Islands from Mauritius before independence and must return them "as rapidly as possible".

Three months later, in May 2019, the UN general assembly voted overwhelm-

ingly to insist the Chagos Islands be returned: 116 states backed the move with only six against – the UK, the US, Israel, Hungary, Australia and the Maldives – in a humiliating defeat for Boris Johnson, who was there as foreign secretary. The UN described what the British had done as "a wrongful act" and demanded the islands be returned within six months.

Last year a UN maritime court also ruled that the UK has no sovereignty over the islands. Whitehall has ignored the rulings, insists the decision was only advisory, and says that the Diego Garcia military base is vital to our strategic interests.

"The UK has no doubt as to our sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory," the Foreign Office said, adding: "Defence facilities on Biot help keep people in Britain and around the world safe, combating some of the most challenging threats to international peace and security, including terrorism and piracy, and responding to humanitarian crises."

Today there is a small concentration of Chagossians living in Crawley, West Sussex. Some of them saw the boat trip as another in a long line of insults from foreign powers. It was a "political stunt from the Mauritians to do some advertising", said Frankie Bontemps, a technician at Crawley hospital, who was born in Mauritius and came to the UK in 2006.

The High Court in London has ruled that the islanders should be allowed to return home, but in 2008 the Foreign Office successfully appealed in the House of Lords. According to the all-party parliamentary group on Chagos, over the years the UK government has spent more than £5.9 million defending its actions.

In 2010, the Blair government even declared the archipelago a marine reserve to try to avoid returning it. The ruse was exposed by Wikileaks.

"We can't preach to Russia, China and the rest of the world about self-determination and respecting rule of law when we don't let the Chagossians have their islands back," said Andrew Mitchell, a Conservative MP and former minister for international development.

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