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Struggling for Our Fundamental Rights: The Exiled People of the Chagos Archipelago



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STRUGGLING FOR OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS: THE EXILED PEOPLE OF THE CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO

Background

- The Chagossian people, who were exiled during the creation of the US military base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, are at a critical and unprecedented moment in their decades-long struggle to return home. With the future of the Chagos islands set to be decided by year's end, the US Government can help rectify an historic injustice exactly 50 years after the final deportations.
- A long-ignored part of the African diaspora, the Chagossians are the descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured Indians who lived on British-controlled Diego Garcia and the surrounding Chagos Archipelago since the time of the American Revolution.
- From 1968 to 1973, the US and UK deported the Chagossians to create a US base on Diego Garcia.
- US officials developed the idea for the base and secretly transferred \$14 million to the UK to forcibly remove the Chagossians 1,200 miles away to slums on the islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles.
- Amid the deportations Anglo-American agents razed Chagossian homes and killed their pet dogs.
- Chagossians received almost no resettlement assistance and soon were living in abject poverty. Ever since Chagossians have been barred from going home and remained deeply impoverished.
- The US Government has repeatedly covered up its role in their exile. Congress held only a single hearing in 50 years on the issue, in 1975.
- Chagossians have been demanding the right to go home in a powerful social movement largely led by women. Support for a return has been building worldwide.
- A 2015 UK Government study and a 2016 UK Supreme Court ruling found Chagossians could resettle their islands in peaceful coexistence with the military base. Civilians live next to US bases worldwide. Military experts agree resettlement would pose no security risk to Diego Garcia.
- The International Court of Justice and the UN General Assembly determined in 2019 that Mauritius—not the UK—has sovereignty over Diego Garcia and the other Chagos islands.
- Human Rights Watch determined that the forced displacement of the Chagossians by the US and UK is a **crime against humanity** and that both governments owe full reparations for harms caused.

Our Aims

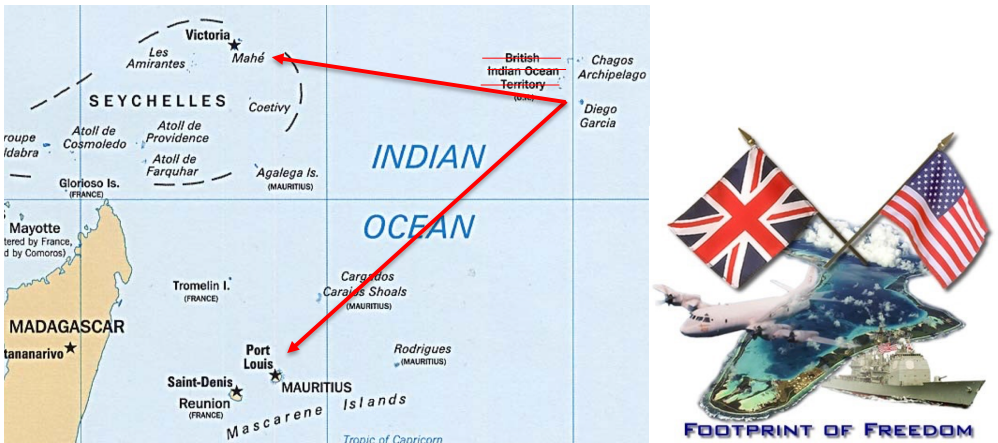
- The UK and Mauritius are now negotiating over the future of Chagos, with the US listed as an "interested party." The US Government must end its silence about its role in exiling the Chagossians and ensure that a final deal respects Chagossians' fundamental right, including the right to live in their homeland, full reparations, and resettlement assistance.
- Chagossians are *not* calling for the removal of the Diego Garcia base or challenging its existence. They are simply asking the US Government for a long-overdue public apology and public support for Chagossians' right to return home with equal rights to work on the base.
- Chagossians are asking for Congressional hearings to tell the full story of the US role in their exile.

U.S. Military Bases Abroad, 2020

In 2020, the United States controlled around 800 bases outside the 50 U.S. states and Washington, DC. Map reflects bases' relative number and positioning given best available data. For ease of comparison we use contemporary borders and a Mercator projection.



Map by Kelly Martin / kmartindesign.com for David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (University of California Press, 2020).



MORALE, WELFARE & RECREATION

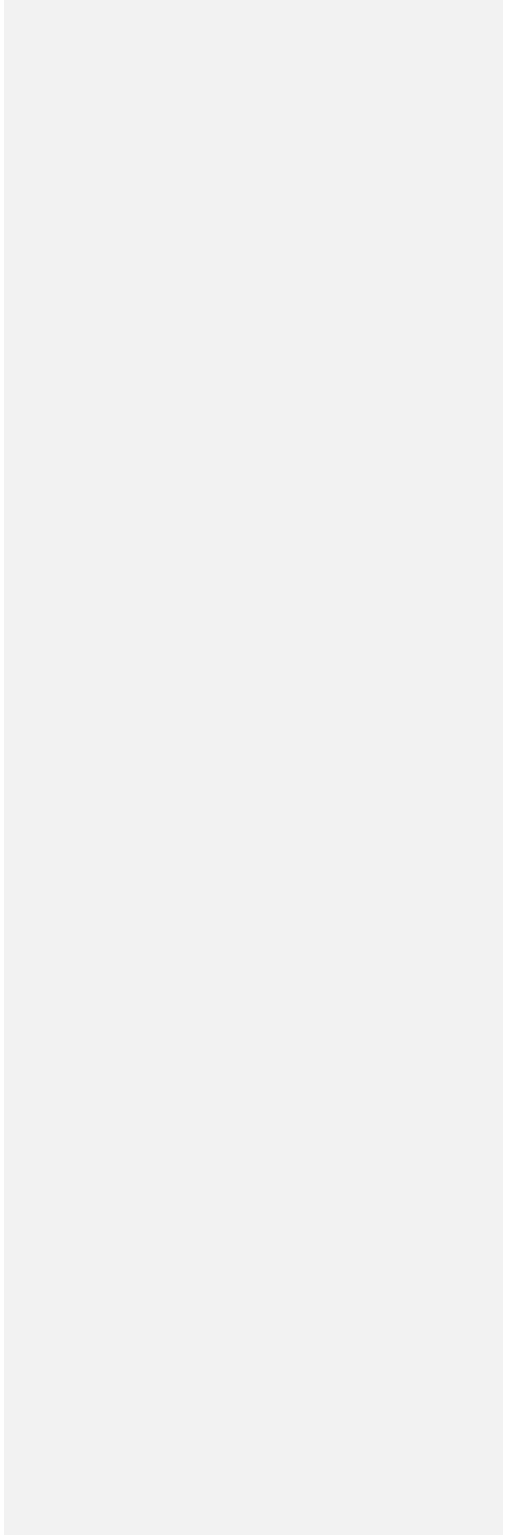
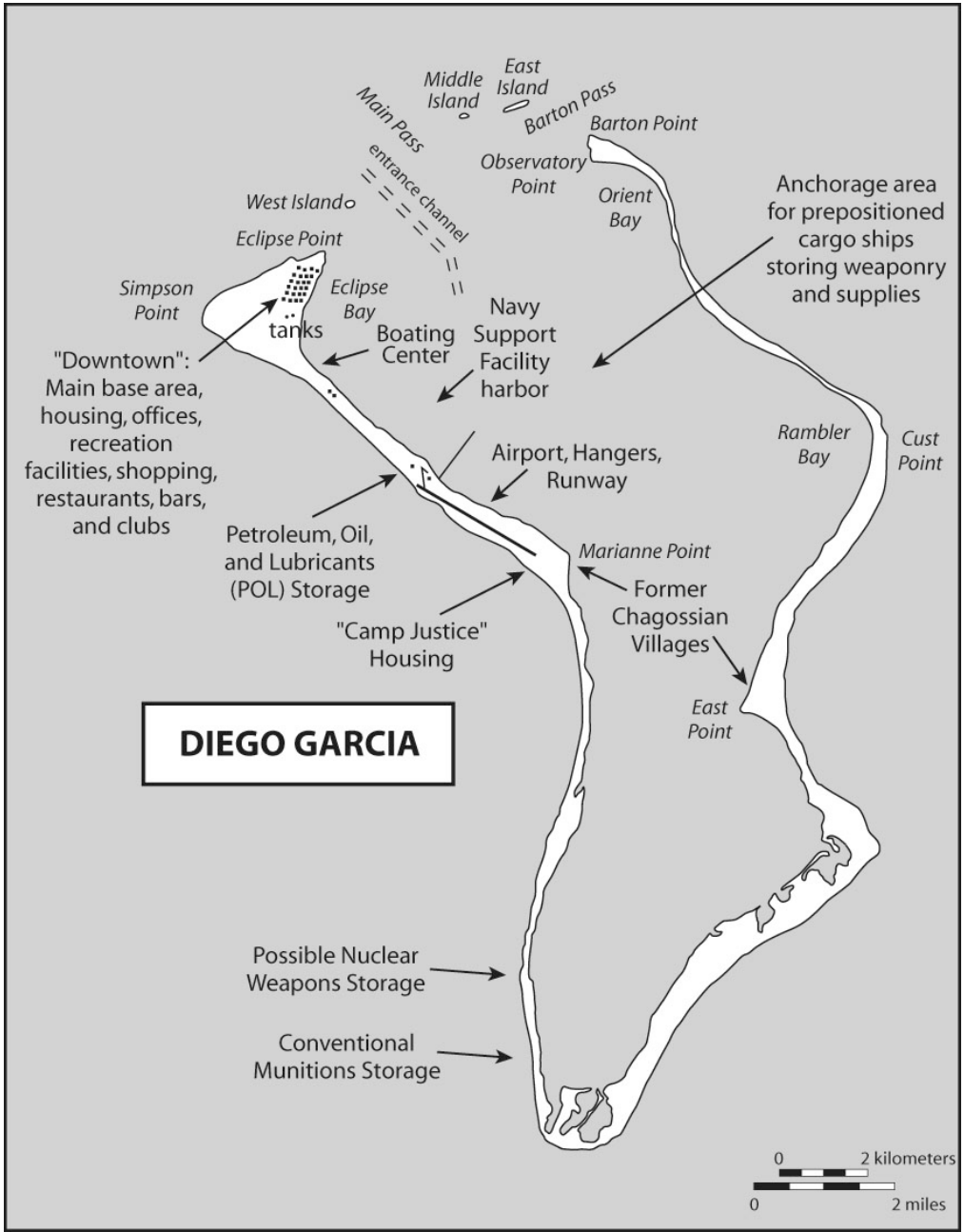
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

BEACH BASH

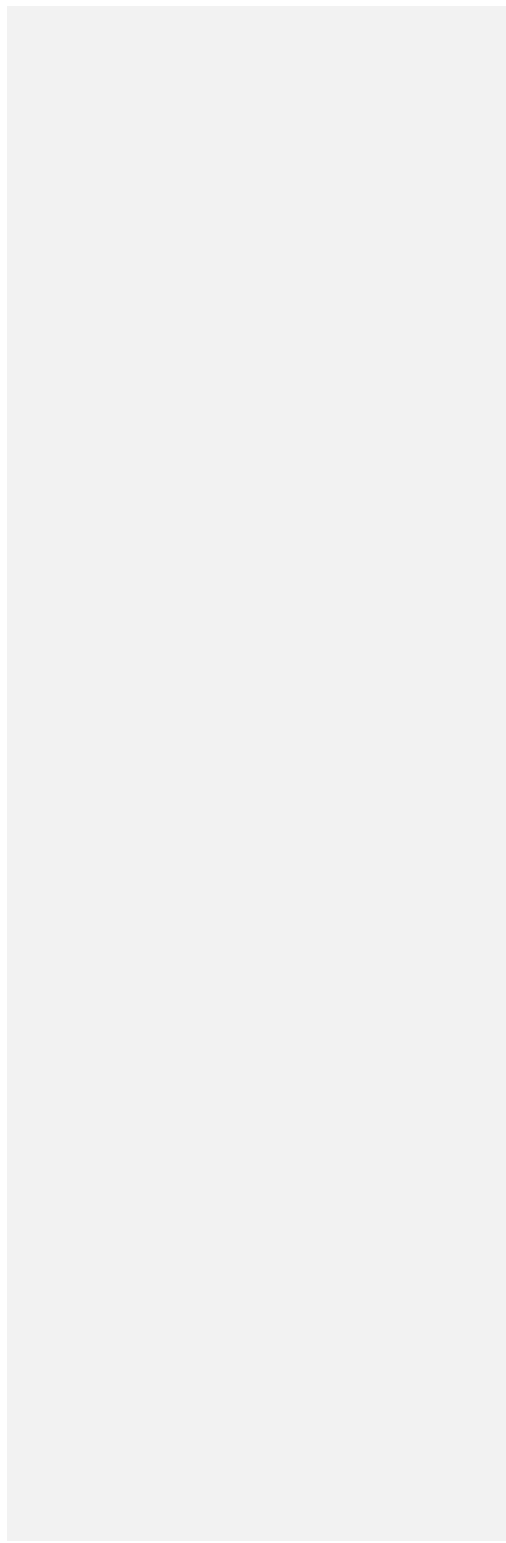
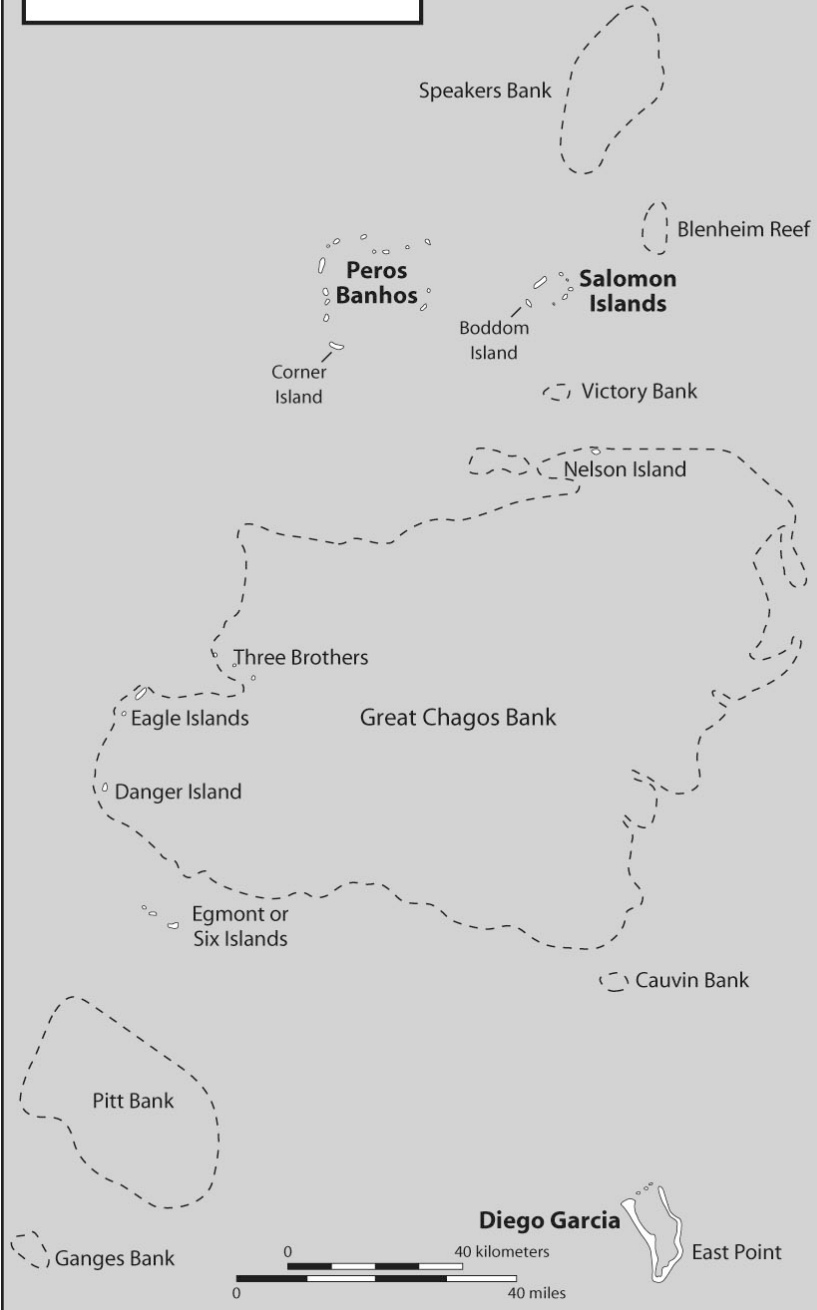
15 JANUARY 2018

For more information please call Recreation Services Office @ 370-2792
DIEGO GARCIA, BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY

MAR BEACH BASH



CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO



TIMELINE OF THE CHAGOSSIAN EXILE AND THE BASE ON DIEGO GARCIA

- 1783—First inhabitants arrive in Chagos Archipelago as enslaved Africans; indentured Indians soon arrive helping form a new, unique society and a people first known as the *Ilois* (Ilois).
- 1957/58—US Navy officials develop “Strategic Island Concept” to acquire islands for future bases. They identify Diego Garcia as their prime acquisition target.
- 1960—US Navy approaches Britain about building a base on Diego Garcia. Secret negotiations begin.
- 1964—During secret US/UK talks, US indicates desire for “exclusive control” of Diego Garcia “without local inhabitants.” UK officials agree.
- 1965—At US urging, UK pressures its colony Mauritius to cede Chagos and creates the *British Indian Ocean Territory*. This violates UN decolonization rules forbidding the division of colonies.
- 1966—“Exchange of Notes” gives US access to Diego Garcia for 50 years with automatic 20-year renewal. UK secretly agrees to remove Chagossians for \$14 million hidden from Congress, Parliament.
- 1968—Chagossians in Mauritius for vacations or medical treatment are barred from returning home and marooned in Mauritius. UK limits supplies of food, medicines to help depopulate the islands.
- 1970—US Navy tells Congress Chagos has no permanent population as part of UK/US plan to “maintain the fiction” that Chagossians are transient workers and not indigenous to the islands.
- 1971—Construction begins on Diego Garcia. British agents and US Navy personnel gas and burn Chagossians’ pet dogs. Chagossians on Diego Garcia deported to Mauritius and Seychelles.
- 1972—UK pays Mauritius £650,000 to resettle Chagossians. UK, US admit newly independent Mauritius cannot resettle newcomers with this sum. Chagossians see no money for more than five years.
- 1973—Last Chagossians deported from other Chagos islands to Mauritius.
- 1975—*Washington Post* breaks the story in Western press, describes Chagossians living in “abject poverty” in Mauritius. One day of Congressional hearings held before interest fades.
- 1982—Chagossians hold hunger strikes, protests, and UK agrees to £4 million compensation. Some Chagossians receive ~\$6,000 total. US spends hundreds of millions expanding Diego Garcia base.
- 2000—Chagossians challenge their exile in UK High Court. The court rules the expulsion was illegal.
- 2001—Diego Garcia base plays key role in US-led war in Afghanistan and, later, in the 2003 war in Iraq.
- 2004—After briefly allowing a return following 2000 ruling—but doing nothing to rebuild Chagossian society—the UK again bars them from returning, effectively overturning the 2000 victory.
- 2008—Chagossians challenge the new ban and win twice more in High Court. On the British government’s last appeal, the UK’s highest court overturns the lower courts, upholding the exile and colonial law.
- 2010—UK creates Chagos Marine Protected Area (MPA) with an exemption for the Diego Garcia base. A

Wikileaks-released State Department cable shows UK, US officials agreed the MPA was best way to prevent Chagossians from going home.

2015—UK releases study confirming the feasibility of Chagossians resettling Chagos. UN Permanent Court of Arbitration rules UK acted illegally in creating an MPA.

2016—Despite the UK government’s own study showing the feasibility of a return, the government denies a return. It offers £40 million in assistance projects over 10 years. CRG refuses the compensation and the attempt to get them to drop their demand to go home.

2017—CRG supports the Mauritian Government at the UN, where General Assembly votes 94-16 to have the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rule on Mauritius’s challenge to UK sovereignty over Chagos and the expulsion of the Chagossians.

2019—The ICJ rules overwhelmingly in favor of Mauritius and the Chagossians, declaring the UK’s 1965 creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory “unlawful” and Mauritius the rightful sovereign of Chagos. The ICJ called on the UK to “end its continued administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible.”

The UN General Assembly responds to the ICJ by passing a resolution 116–6 ordering the UK “to cooperate with Mauritius in facilitating the resettlement” of the Chagossians. Mauritius emphasizes its willingness to allow the US base to stay, publicly offering a 99-year lease.

2022—The UK government announces it will begin negotiations with the Mauritian government over Chagos and all remaining issues. Chagossians demand to be included in the negotiations about their future. To date, the UK has excluded them.

2023—Human Rights Watch, in a first for a major human rights organization, finds the US and UK committed “crimes against humanity” against Chagossians, including racial discrimination.

UK-Mauritius negotiations over Chagos continue without Chagossian participation. US officials are listed as an “interested party” in the negotiations and are assumed to be deeply involved.

Olivier Bancoult, chair of the Chagos Refugees Group, and Liseby Élysée, who testified before the ICJ, are nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. The Chagos Refugees Group is also nominated.

Chagossian litigation continues in UK courts. Bancoult makes a major trip to the US to the build support in Congress, at the UN, and beyond.

The US and UK stole our homes. 50 years on, we're still being denied justice

OPINION: My people live in impoverished exile. Governments must stop talking about 'regret' and give our islands back

[Olivier Bancoult](#)

18 April 2023

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/chagos-islands-olivier-bancoult-uk-us-military-base-human-rights-watch/>

Field Code Changed



US military personnel live in my birthplace, the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, but I am not allowed to. Since I was four years old, my people, the Chagossians, have lived in impoverished exile, while the US military has been enjoying the fruits of my homeland.

The plight of my people has been ignored for more than 50 years. But recently, for the first time, a major human rights organisation, [Human Rights Watch](#), called attention to the “crimes against humanity” committed against my people by both the US and British governments. And for the first time, the US government has finally admitted that “the manner in which” we were removed “is regrettable”.

Between 1968 and 1973, the US and British governments forcibly removed us from our homeland during construction of the US military base on Diego Garcia, the largest island in our Chagos Archipelago, which Britain has controlled since 1815. The two governments took our houses, our jobs, almost all our possessions, and the land of our ancestors, leaving us with nothing.

As the leader of the [Chagos Refugees Group](#), I have spoken to people around the world, asking them to support our struggle to return home and to be compensated for our loss. In May, we will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the last deportation from Chagos. The new report and the slight change in tone from the US government may help create the momentum we need. Later this year, I am planning to visit

Washington, DC and New York City to speak with members of Congress, the Biden administration, and other Americans to ask for their support.

For more than 50 years, the United States and Britain, which call themselves champions of human rights, have been ignoring the human rights of my people, including the fundamental right to live in our homeland. We are more Black lives that have not mattered.

Like vice president Kamala Harris, my people are of mixed African and Indian ancestry. We are the descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured Indians who first settled the Chagos islands around the time of the American Revolution.

Life was very peaceful in Chagos. We had our own culture. We had our traditions. We all lived as one family. We all had work on coconut plantations. We weren't rich but, as my mother said, it was the sweet life.

That life was taken from us when in the 1960s US officials asked Britain to create a base on Diego Garcia. In 1966, the US government secretly agreed to pay the UK \$14m: the US would get a base, and the UK agreed to remove my people without our consent.

US and UK officials invented fictions that we were "transient contract workers" who could be deported. In reality, as they knew, we had lived in Chagos for generations. One British official called us "Tarzans" and "man Fridays".

My family was exiled in 1968 after travelling to a hospital for treatment for my sister, Noellie, who had been in an accident. Sadly, the hospital could not save Noellie. When my mother went to get our boat tickets home, she was told our islands had been sold to build a US military base. She was told we could never return home again. After hearing the news, my father, who had the key to our home in his pocket, had a stroke.

Other Chagossians were deported between 1971 and 1973. They forced our people onto overcrowded cargo ships and dumped us 1,200 miles away in Mauritius and Seychelles. People said conditions on board were like slave ships. During the deportations on Diego Garcia, a British government manager and US sailors killed our pet dogs by gassing them and then burning their carcasses.

In exile in Mauritius and Seychelles, life was very difficult for us. We lived in slums. We found lives of unemployment, drugs, alcohol, and prostitution. My mother had to work multiple jobs to feed our family. Sometimes she picked stale bread out of trash cans to feed us. Sometimes we went to sleep hungry. My siblings and I sold water in a cemetery after school to make money. Over the years I lost three brothers to drugs and alcohol and illness. My sister committed suicide. My mother had to go to a psychiatric hospital. My father, and many Chagossians like him, died of sadness because we couldn't return to our homeland.

Still we demanded our fundamental right to return. Led by women like my mother, we held demonstrations and went on hunger strikes. In 1983, my mother and other Chagossian women created the Chagos Refugees Group to work for our community. When I was 18, they asked me to get involved because I was one of only a few Chagossians getting an education and learning English.

Through the years we won small victories, such as the right to full UK citizenship, after we sued the US and UK governments. US courts sadly dismissed our suit, saying they had no right to overrule executive decisions about military policy. Three times we defeated the UK government in the High Court in London only to lose on appeal. We are continuing our struggle in the courts as both governments refuse to let us return home. The US, despite its statement of regret, has said little more than: "The United States remains steadfast in its respect for and promotion of human rights."

Our fortunes began to change when we joined the Mauritian government in taking the UK to the International Court of Justice. In 2019, the court ruled that the UK's occupation of Chagos was "unlawful" because it violated decolonisation rules. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution, by 113 votes to six, ordering Britain to "withdraw its colonial administration" and "cooperate with Mauritius in facilitating the resettlement" of my people.

After two years ignoring the ruling, the British government finally announced in November that it would negotiate with Mauritius over sovereignty, the base, and our right of return. We are encouraged by the progress, but once again we are being excluded from these negotiations over our islands. Once again, powerful governments are making decisions about our lives over our heads.

In its report documenting the crimes against humanity committed against us, Human Rights Watch demanded the UK "ensure meaningful and effective consultations with the Chagossian people," adding that "any future agreement concerning Chagos needs to be centred around the rights of the Chagossians, including the right to return, and full reparations for the decades of abuse".

The UK's minister for overseas territories, Zac Goldsmith, said in a letter to Human Rights Watch that the British government had "deep regret" over our treatment, but claimed we have "no right of abode" in our islands, and said nothing about reparations. The government promised only to "engage with Chagossian groups as negotiations progress" with Mauritius.

Now is the time for the two governments to stop talking about "regret" and act to end our suffering. The US and UK should fully involve Chagossians in the negotiations over our homeland's future. We need to have the right to return. And we need to receive full reparations, including resettlement assistance.

Everyone should have the right to live in their birthplace. Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that "no one shall be subjected to... exile". How can we accept that the so-called champions of human rights, the US and UK governments, have banished our fundamental rights? How is it possible that other people are making barbecues on our beaches while we are living in exile?

We were born on these islands. We need the right to live on these islands. All we are asking for is our human rights.

**Louis Olivier Bancoult Bio:
Known as the "Nelson Mandela" of the Chagossian People**

Known as the "Nelson Mandela" of the Chagossian people, Olivier Bancoult is chair and co-founder of the Chagos Refugees Group. For forty years, under the leadership of Bancoult and a group of powerful women elders, the Chagos Refugees Group has promoted the welfare, interests, and rights of the exiled Chagossian people. Bancoult and other Chagossians have been living in exile since the US and UK governments expelled them from their homeland, the Chagos Islands, in the 1960s and 1970s to make way for a US military base on the island of Diego Garcia. Bancoult, an electrician by training, has gained international acclaim for leading the struggle for Chagossians' right to return home. For more than 25 years, Bancoult has waged a legal battle against the US and UK governments, winning historic victories in British courts and the International Court of Justice. Bancoult also has represented the Chagossians in London and Washington, DC, at the United Nations and the Vatican, and at numerous international forums in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

LEARN MORE

- ❖ *Chagos Refugees Group:* <https://thechagosrefugeesgroup.com/home-crg/>
- ❖ *Let Us Return USA:* LetUsReturnUSA.org
- ❖ *Watch the Human Rights Watch video (18 min):* www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkFhy_ET4ik&t=1s
- ❖ *Watch other videos:* www.LetUsReturnUSA.org/videos
- ❖ *Read, listen, and watch more:* www.LetUsReturnUSA.org/learnmore
- ❖ *Watch John Pilger's "Stealing a Nation" (56 min):* johnpilger.com/videos/stealing-a-nation
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