

CHAGOS REFUGEES GROUP – LET US RETURN USA!

Nobel Laureates Urge President Obama to Bring Justice to the Exiled Chagossian People before Leaving Office

Press Release

Washington, DC, January 5, 2017 -- Seven Nobel Laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, are urging fellow Nobel Laureate President Barack Obama to use his last days in office to help end five decades of exile suffered by the Chagossian people, who were displaced from their homes on the British-controlled island of Diego Garcia by a U.S. military base.

“Only you now have the power to help the Chagossians return to their ancestral homeland” in the Indian Ocean, the Laureates tell President Obama. By helping the people return home, Obama can “cement [his] legacy as a defender of human rights,” the Nobel winners’ letter points out (full text below).

The Chagossians are descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured Indians whose ancestors lived on Diego Garcia and in the rest of the Chagos Archipelago since the time of the American Revolution. The Chagossians have been living in impoverished exile since the U.S. and U.K. governments forcibly removed them between 1968 and 1973 while establishing the U.S. base on Diego Garcia. For almost 50 years, the two governments have refused Chagossian demands to go home. In signing the letter, Archbishop Tutu described the people as “marginalised and ill-used children of God.”

The Nobel Laureates stress that Chagossians aren’t asking Obama to close or alter the military installation: “They are only asking...to return...to live in peaceful coexistence with the base.”

The letter’s signatories are Tutu, Jody Williams, Mairead Maguire, Tawakkol Karman, Dr. Yu Joe Huang, Dr. Stephen P. Meyers, and Dr. Edward L. Vine. They ask Obama to take five steps including “to publicly state that the U.S. does not oppose the Chagossians returning to their islands”; “to recognize Chagossians’ basic right to live in their homeland with equal rights to compete for civilian jobs on the base”; and “to provide reasonable assistance for Chagossians’ resettlement.”

“You have the power to show the world that the U.S. upholds basic human rights,” the letter concludes. “Please help ensure that justice is done for the Chagossians.”

The text of the letter from the Nobel Laureates, biographies of the signatories, and quotations from Chagossian leaders follow.

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Comments about the Letter from Leaders in the Chagossian Movement to Return

Leader of the Chagos Refugees Group, Olivier Bancoult: “We hope that as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, President Barack Obama will pay attention to his seven fellow Peace Prize winners

and, before leaving the White House, correct the injustice committed against Chagossians. If he does, the world will remember him as someone who restored the fundamental rights of Chagossians to live on our birthplace. We feel better at home, so live and let us live there in peace and harmony.”

Spokesperson for the Chagos Refugees Group UK branch, Sabrina Jean: “The Chagos Refugees Group welcomes this important letter from Nobel Laureates to President Obama. We, Chagossians, have been living in exile for decades, fighting to return to our homeland. Before you leave office, President Obama, please help right the wrong of this terrible injustice done to the Chagossian community. President Obama, everyone has the right to live in their motherland, but why not us?”

Chair of the Seychelles Chagossians Committee, Pierre Prosper: “The Seychelles Chagossians Committee have been fighting for decades for our right to return together with the rest of our Chagossians brothers and sisters. We ask that Chagossians are looked at, valued and treated as human beings. Our pain is a ‘real human hurt.’ We believe in our capacity and devotion to create a thriving community on our native land. President Obama, we need your support to allow this to happen.”

Let Us Return USA! spokesperson and longtime attorney for the Chagossians Ali Beydoun: “We thank the Nobel Laureates for standing up for the Chagossians, who have been ignored for so long. We call on President Obama to direct the Pentagon to drop any opposition to the return of Chagossians who wish to live on Diego Garcia, as well as on their other islands, more than 150 miles from the base. The U.S. government played a key role in the Chagossians’ suffering by ordering and financing their expulsion. Let Us Return USA! urges President Obama to redress this violation of fundamental human rights before he leaves office.”

Chagos Refugees Group lawyer in Mauritius, Sivakumaren (Robin) Mardemootoo: “When Olivier Bancoult and I met with President Nelson Mandela in Pretoria, Mandela was adamant that there could be no legal, moral or other reason which could stand in the way of a resettlement of the Chagos Islanders back on their Chagos Islands. I am baffled by the UK Government’s decision to deny resettlement on the ground of cost to the British taxpayer. Resettlement of the Chagossians is an obligation, further to a forceful eviction; it is neither a favour nor an act of charity. I am stupefied by the shameful inability of the US to correct such wrong and by its callous and appalling policy of quiet disregard towards those islanders. How can the US morally continue to ignore the 45 years misery of these exiled islanders who have continuously asked to be resettled on their islands after an inhumane eviction? How can the UK and the US continue to champion morality and righteousness while continuing to act so immorally and wrongfully towards the Chagossians? Hypocrisy at its best.”

The Chagos Refugees Group represents Chagossians living in exile in Mauritius and the United Kingdom in their struggle to return to their homeland.

Let Us Return USA! is a U.S.-based group of citizens supporting the Chagossian people’s struggle to return to their homeland in the Chagos Archipelago.

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For a full press kit and additional background: www.LetUsReturnUSA.org

Letter from Nobel Laureates Urging President Barack H. Obama to Bring Justice to the Exiled Chagossian People

January 5, 2017

President Barack H. Obama
The White House
Washington, DC, USA

Dear Mr. President,

In the last days of your presidency, we write to you as fellow Nobel Laureates to urge you to correct the historic injustice suffered by the Chagossian people, who have been living in impoverished exile for almost fifty years.

The Chagossians were displaced from their homes on the British-controlled island of Diego Garcia to make way for a U.S. military base. For decades, Chagossians have asked for the right to go home. In November, the people were devastated when the U.K. said it would not allow a return despite a U.K. government-funded study showing that resettlement is feasible. Only you now have the power to help the Chagossians return to their ancestral homeland and, in the process, cement your legacy as a defender of human rights.

We must emphasize that Chagossians are *not* asking you to close or alter the U.S. base. They are only asking to be allowed to return to their islands to live in peaceful coexistence with the base.

The Chagossians' ancestors first came to the Chagos Archipelago as enslaved Africans and indentured Indians. From around the time of the American Revolution until their displacement, generations of Chagossians lived on the islands cultivating a proud culture.

In a 1966 U.S./U.K. agreement, the U.S. promised the U.K. \$14 million for basing rights and the removal of all Chagossians from Diego Garcia. Between 1968 and 1973, British agents, assisted by U.S. Navy personnel, deported the Chagossians 1,200 miles away to slums on the islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles. The Chagossians received no resettlement assistance.

Since their expulsion, the Chagossians have been living in profound poverty and struggling to return to their homeland. Sadly, previous U.S. and U.K. administrations have blocked any resettlement and largely ignored the people's suffering.

Recently, support for a return has been building worldwide. Civilians live next to U.S. bases worldwide, and military experts agree resettlement would pose no security risk on Diego Garcia. The recent extension of the 1966 U.S./U.K. agreement provides the ideal opportunity to honor the Chagossians' right to live in their homeland. Thus, we ask you:

- (1) To publicly state that the U.S. does not oppose the Chagossians returning to their islands;
- (2) To recognize Chagossians' basic right to live in their homeland with equal rights to compete for civilian jobs on the base;
- (3) To provide reasonable assistance for Chagossians' resettlement and assistance in seeking employment on the base;
- (4) To guarantee and enshrine these rights in the U.S./U.K. base agreement; and
- (5) To begin direct negotiations with Chagossian representatives on these issues.

You have the power to rectify this historic injustice. You have the power to show the world that the U.S. upholds basic human rights. Please help ensure that justice is done for the Chagossians.

Sincerely,

Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Nobel Peace Prize, 1984

Jody Williams
Nobel Peace Prize, 1997

Tawakkol Karman
Nobel Peace Prize, 2011

Mairead Corrigan Maguire
Nobel Peace Prize, 1976

Dr. Yu Joe Huang
Nobel Peace Prize, 2007, member of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Dr. Stephen P. Meyers
Nobel Peace Prize, 2007, member of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Dr. Edward L. Vine
Nobel Peace Prize, 2007, member of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Signatories' Biographies

Archbishop Desmond Tutu received the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership in the nonviolent opposition movement against South Africa's brutal system of racial apartheid. See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1984/tutu-facts.html

Jody Williams shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines for her role as a "driving force in the launching of an international campaign against landmines." See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1997/williams-facts.html

Tawakkol Karman shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work." At just 32 years old, the journalist and human rights activist became the youngest-ever Peace Prize winner and the first Arab woman to win the Prize. See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-facts.html

Mairead Corrigan Maguire received the 1976 Nobel Peace Prize with Betty Williams as founders of the Northern Ireland Peace Movement (later renamed Community of Peace People). See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1976/corrigan-facts.html

Dr. Yu Joe Huang is a member of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with former U.S. Vice President Al Gore Jr., for "their efforts to obtain and disseminate greater knowledge concerning man-made climate changes and the steps that need to be taken to counteract those changes." See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2007/ipcc-facts.html

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