

Chagos Islands: No happy ending

by GWYNNE DYER

If you believe the British government (which you should never do), a new agreement will bring justice for the people of the Chagos Islands, who have lived in exile for more than half a century after the main island, Diego Garcia, was turned into a giant American airbase in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Britain is officially handing the Chagos Islands over to Mauritius, which is supposed to be a good thing. A joint statement by the UK and Mauritian governments says the new agreement will 'address the wrongs of the past and demonstrate the commitment of both parties to support the welfare of the Chagossians.'

US President Joe Biden agreed, saying the agreement demonstrates that 'countries can overcome longstanding historical challenges to reach peaceful and mutually beneficial outcomes.' When they talk like that, you know they're up to no good.

Clive Baldwin, the senior legal adviser at Human Rights Watch, demurred: 'The agreement...does not guarantee that the Chagossians will return to their homeland, appears to explicitly ban them from the largest island, Diego Garcia, for another century, and does not mention the reparations they are all owed to rebuild their future.'

The Chagossians were deported and dumped into exile in 1973 in a post-colonial deal between the United Kingdom and the United States, which wanted a big bomber base in the Indian Ocean with no troublesome locals nearby. The same parties are now modifying that deal, but only to deflect criticism. Nothing really changes.

Mauritius and the Chagos Islands 2,000 km to the northeast were both uninhabited until the European empires imported African slaves, and later indentured Indian labourers, to grow various cash crops. Mauritius got its independence from Britain in 1968 'but only after agreeing to let the United Kingdom keep the Chagos Islands.

Britain had no particular use for these low-lying islands or the people living on them 'they are only 'a few Tarzans and Man Fridays', a Foreign Office official noted. However, it did want a discount on the expensive Polaris missiles it was buying from the United States for its submarine-borne nuclear deterrent. (The actual nuclear warheads were British-made.)

The United States was looking for a bomber base within reach of everywhere in Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, preferably with no inconvenient civilian population. So it was a match made in heaven: the B-52s moved in, and the local Ilois (as the residents of the Chagos Islands called themselves) were moved out.

That last bit was awkward, because the Ilois didn't want to go. However, there were only 2,000 of them and they had no weapons. They were bundled aboard ships, their pets were shot or gassed, and they were dumped in various shanty-towns in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Now they number around 10,000, about a third of them in England.

Many of them still want to go home, and the beauty of the new agreement is that they can't. They are still not allowed to return to Diego Garcia, the big island where most of their parents and grandparents lived, and they will have no voice in negotiating the treaty between the UK and Mauritius that sets all this in concrete.

Why go through all this legal nonsense if nothing really changes? Because an international law from 1960 (UN General Assembly resolution 1514) bans the break-up of colonies before they get independence.. That means that the UK broke the law by forcing Mauritius to hand over the Chagos Islands in return for its independence.

The new treaty will tidy all that up. Mauritius regains legal sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, which is very satisfying for Mauritian national pride. However, Mauritius agrees to continue the existing deal on Diego Garcia (including the ban on return by

the Chagossians) for the indefinite future.

The weirdest thing about all this cruelty and cynicism is that there is no 'good' (i.e. pragmatically useful) reason for it. Britain was and still is only looking for leverage with the United States on other issues: the only British uniforms to be seen on Diego Garcia are in the control tower and the cafeteria.

The American obsession with expelling the entire civilian population of the archipelago, including people who lived on small islets 160 km. away from the runway, makes even less sense.

Overseas US air bases elsewhere do not require thousands of square kilometres of depopulated space around them. The Ilois are not nationalists (too few and too mixed), or Muslims (they're mostly Christians), or any other sort of group that might have grievances against Americans. Indeed, they would have been happy to have some jobs on the base.

It never made sense. It doesn't make sense now. And it looks like it will continue not to make sense for a long time to come.