

A Simple Message for Britain: You Should Be Ashamed - Rita Bancoult (Chagos)

OPEN LETTER TO THE BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER IN MAURITIUS

Dear Mr Leake

I am Marie Rita Elysée Bancoult, the mother of Olivier Bancoult, leader of Chagos Refugee Group (CRG). I am sorry to take your precious time, but I would pray you to bear with me while I pour my heart out to you. I must tell you that the recent revelations of WikiLeaks were in no way a revelation to us, Chagossians. We always knew that the creation of the Marine Protected Area (MPA) was to prevent us going back on our islands. This is a very mean and cruel way of denying us the right to live as a whole nation. Your government should be ashamed of this. The released secret documents came only as a proof of what we already knew.

Today, as a Chagossian, aged 85, I want you to understand my plight, my suffering, and to realise all the pains that I have been through since I set my feet here in Mauritius.

I have lost my husband, I have lost five children, of whom I have buried two on Peros Banhos and three here in Mauritius. Today I am left only with Olivier, my last-born. He is my messiah. He is the one who will free us all. He is not alone in this battle. All our people are behind him. So do not make the mistake of thinking that we are a harmless bunch. We may not have education and arms, but we have our faith in God and the will to fight injustice.

Your government has taken us heartlessly and brutally from our heaven and dumped us here in hell. My son is relentlessly struggling to get us all back on our island.

I want you today to know that I will stop fighting only when I breathe my last and lie down with my hands crossed over my chest... I will not surrender my dignity and I will show the British of what mettle I am made. Today, December 10, is also Human Rights Day. But for us Chagossians, there have been no respect for our rights. This is something that is unknown to your government – our rights. I am also very disappointed that my dear Olivier has not been able to meet the Mauritian Prime Minister, Dr Navin

Ramgoolam, this week.

The Chagossian community had high hopes about this meeting as this would have given us a sense of direction and we would have then celebrated Human Rights Day. You must know that, for me, the British have robbed the Chagossians of their right to live.

Believe me, this crime will not go unpunished.

The day I heard that I would never be allowed again to go back to my island it was as if a knife had been plunged into my heart. I could feel the blood oozing out. I can still feel it. We have been sold like animals. Do you know how it feels to be snatched from one's homeland and dumped in the wild? You are treated worse than an animal. You have no dignity. But worst of all, you have no identity. We, Chagossians, have been robbed of our dignity. This is how I feel here. Mr Leake, my navel is buried there, in Peros Banhos. I cannot stop craving for my land and the tombs of my near and dear ones I left behind.

The day I lie on my death bed, with me will also die the craving I have carried in my heart since the day I left my homeland – that is to go back there. Living far from Peros Banhos has been a curse on my family and my people.

Please understand me. I have only one wish now and that is to die in Peros Banhos and be buried in the cemetery where I have already buried two of my children, and my parents. I fear that I may die before my wish is fulfilled. I will never forget all the pain and miseries that have been forced upon me and my family. I'd rather continue looking for food out of dustbins. But never would I renounce my rights. I would never wish the same to my worst enemy.

This is all I wanted to tell you. I hope this letter touches your heart. I also wish you never go through what I and my people have been through these past years. This is the worst curse than a person and a nation can sustain.

Marie Rita Elysée Bancoult

Cite Zilois

Pointe aux Sables

<http://chagosrefugeesgroup.net/blog/?p=617>

Some background information

During the sixteenth century, Pedro Mascarenhas discovers Reunion, Mauritius, Rodrigues and a group of islands which the Portuguese would name Cinco Chagas.

In 1532, Diego Garcia lands on the most important island of the Cinco Chagas and named it after him.

In the seventeenth century, British, French and Dutch sailors renamed the Cinco Chagas the Chagos.

The Archipelago remained uninhabited and was still when knight Grenier and Rochon, an astronomer, explored it in 1769 and took possession. In 1776, French Governor François de Souillac decided to occupy the Chagos still uninhabited. Jouissances, or leases were granted to enable plantation companies to produce coconut oil and copra. In those days there was slavery and most of the workers were slaves who came from Madagascar and Mozambique and it is their descendants who have become the Chagossians or Ilois as they are known.

The Islands passed into British hands during the Napoleonic wars and they were formally ceded to UK with the Colony of Mauritius of which they formed part by the Treaty of Paris in 1814. From that date to the deportation period, Chagos Islands, part of Mauritius, were a British Colony. The colonial authority sent on exile lepers to the Chagos, where slavery was abolished in 1835.

The Chagos Islands were identified as a potential military base in the 1960's and the population proved to be totally dispensable when the UK and the US got together to plan strategy

In February 1964 the defense departments of UK and US met several times. In August 1964 there was a joint US/UK military visit, to survey the Islands in the presence of the civilian administrator, Mr. Newton. They were very impressed with the depth of the lagoon at Diego Garcia the largest island with its sheltered deep water anchorage which was ideal for aircraft carriers. The length and flatness of the island offered 20 miles of natural air strip with only coconut plantations on it. But there was also villages, graves, churches, hospitals, schools and worst of all there were natives working fishing and generally living all over the place. The Americans had made it clear all along that they didn't want to have a population problem and they were expecting the islands to be given to them "clean and sanitized". So the civilian administrator declared that the Chagos is part of Mauritius and so as 'Mauritians' the Chagossians are more likely to go back 'home' and disappear. He describes the population as all Mauritian or Seychellois and refers to a handful of folk who might have been born there.

His report contained frequent reference to contract labourers who it was assumed must have some where to go home to.

From here on the idea emerged that this long settled population having its own culture and identity was in some way a population of migrants, mere contract workers from Mauritius and Seychelles. Between 1895 and 1965 when the islands were detached there were 2,970 births on the islands, so there would have been at least 2,000 native adults up to the age of 70 living there when the military team came along. It was also pointed out that none of them own their own homes and they have no property on the islands. But this was because they were allowed to build their own homes on a plot of land given to them by the plantation company that owned the freehold of the islands and although they didn't have title deeds, they had customary title to their homes and they passed their homes from generation to generation. Policies were evolved in Washington and Whitehall which pretended the population was not settled or permanent.

It was Britain alone that decided to clear the islands of their inhabitants in a policy of "complete sterilization." The lies are laid out in hundreds of pages of memos and letters tabled in the British court, almost all of them marked "secret."

"There will be no indigenous population except seagulls," said one memo circulated within the British Foreign Office.

"Unfortunately, along with the birds go some few Tarzans or Man Fridays whose origins are obscure," British diplomat Dennis Greenhill wrote in a 1966 letter that reflects typical racist disregard for the Ilois.

"We would not wish it to become general knowledge that some of the inhabitants have lived on Diego Garcia for at least two generations and could, therefore, be regarded as 'belongers,' " said another memo.

The policy was authorised at the highest level by the Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1968 and 1969. When the policy was authorized at the highest level it was known that whatever citizenship rights attached to birth on the islands they were going to be overridden.

First the islands had to be constitutionally detached from Mauritius. This meant getting the consent of the pre-independence Government of Mauritius who was compliant. A price of GDP 3 million was agreed for Mauritius' loss of the islands when they became independent, and the pre-independence Mauritian Government readily agreed to accept the displaced islanders for a small payment of GDP 650,000. Similar arrangements were made with Seychelles where a civilian airport was built. These were the only two countries that knew anything about the population and might have objected.

So in November 1965 the Queen passed an order in Council detaching the Chagos Islands from Mauritius and constituting a new colony: the British Indian Ocean Territory. Its governor and legislature was to be the Commissioner for BIOT. He was given the normal legislative power to make laws for the 'Peace, Order and Good Government of the territory'. These arrangements were described as simple 'administrative measure' involving a different administrative arrangement from those in Mauritius. No hint was given about the defense use or the removal of the population.

In 1967 a compulsory purchase order was passed by the Commissioner and later that year he negotiated the purchase of the islands from Chagos Agalega Limited, the plantation company for about GDP 750,000.

However because the Americans were not ready to build the military, there was a delay of four years during which the British, wanting to make a little profit out of their investment, kept on the plantation company to run them, with the population of workers, on the basis of a management contract. From now on the plantation administrator had to get the permission of the BIOT Commissioner for every bag of flour brought to the island, and for every sailing to and from the islands. Strange things began to happen. The population began to complain of lack of food coming to the islands. Many families who left for routine visits or for medical attention in Mauritius or Seychelles failed to return. Those still on the Islands couldn't have known, because there was no communication, but in practice families who turned up in Mauritius to book their return passage to Chagos were told by the shipping company that boats had been cancelled and the Islands sold to the Americans. This tragic news tore apart the families and their homes and built up a pool of displaced islanders in Mauritius totally destitute and without jobs or homes and who could not get back to Chagos. A witness reported: I saw people of the same age as me wearing all kinds of nice t-shirts. I didn't have these. And they got them from Mauritius. I went there planning to buy some along with having some holidays of two or three months, then when the ship would be going back, i would return there. But when the ship was ready to go, I didn't have the right to go back to my native land. And all this till now.

By January 1971 the Americans had secured Congressional approval and the first US navy personnel arrived with their ships and helicopters.

The plantation administrator, Marcel Moulinie was told to shut up shop and he was obliged to remove the population from Diego Garcia where most of them lived. For a short while he maintained the plantations on other islands that is the Peros Banhos and the Salomon Group which are about 135 miles from Diego Garcia

but by September 1973 he was told to close down finally, and the final evacuations took place. These dreadful journeys are written deep in Chagossian folk law. They do not forget the appalling journeys in which they suffered, in boats that were overladen with people, which they were obliged to share with horses in the hold and where bad weather made people vomit, women miscarry and some to jump overboard and commit suicide.

On arrival in Seychelles they were housed in the local prison because there was no accommodation, before making the onward journey to Mauritius where they were summarily dumped on the dockside. By now there was a pool of around 2,000 displaced islanders roaming around Mauritius, jobless, homeless and destitute. No money was paid out of the GDP 650,000 compensation because it was too little to do anything effective. Many slept on the beach or built temporary tin shacks living in awful conditions without water. Some shacks were shared between 15 and 20 people. A few were given Dockers' flats, some obtained temporary employment but many starved. At this time Mauritius had a 25 percent unemployment rate and such social security as there was, was by no means enough to keep body and soul together. Those who were dumped in Seychelles suffered in the same way, sleeping rough and living on wild fruit.

The Ilois themselves with the help of some concerned Mauritians sent petitions both to the UK Government and the US Government begging for help and asking to return home. Their pleas fell on deaf ears.

After a few years the situation was so bad that it became a serious social problem in Mauritius. This identifiable community did not merge into the population, its skills of the islands were unsuited to the sugar plantations on Mauritius and they had no hope of joining in the gradual industrialization of that country. They remained marginalized and discriminated against on grounds that they were an inferior almost foreign group. They had been kings of the castle in Chagos where there was full employment, homes and food provided. Now they were at the bottom of the social heap, despised and bewildered. They had no money to pay rent or buy food. Many committed suicide, took to drugs or alcohol or simply died of a broken heart, pining for their beloved islands.

A few years later the Mauritius Government became involved, and there was in 1982 a further agreement between the British and Mauritian Governments in which a sum of GDP 4 million was put into a trust fund for the Ilois. In the September 1983 this was distributed to 1,344 identified islanders who each received a little over Rs8000, some of them managed to get rudimentary housing or a small plot of land but many simply paid off their debts and carried on living in squalor as before. As a condition of receiving the money, they were obliged to

sign highly detailed legalistic forms written in English renouncing all rights against the UK Government including the claim to return to their islands. These forms were not explained or translated and when the money was disbursed, the Chagossians were required merely to put their thumb print to a piece of paper which they thought was a mere receipt. The islanders vigorously deny that by doing so, they knew they were giving up their rights to return to Chagos or to seek further compensation. They point out that they were desperate for money and were driven by dire necessity to accept anything on offer. Their desperation was taken advantage of. The Chagossians continued to agitate for compensation and for the right to return home. The Government pleaded Public Interest Immunity and refused to produce most of the sensitive documents. Finally, when the case had been withdrawn, all the documents had been destroyed at the insistence of the Government.

The British Indian Ocean Territory had its own legal system and there was a specific law of the British Indian Ocean Territory - the Immigration Ordinance of 1971 which prohibited anyone from being on the islands regardless of birth in the Territory only military personnel or those in possession of a permit could enter or remain on the islands.

But because of their birth on the Chagos Islands which remained a British Dependent Territory, the islanders retained citizenship of the UK and colonies as well as the becoming Mauritius citizens under the Mauritius Constitution of 1968. The British of course had taken no steps to inform them of their constitutional tie between subject and sovereign. Chagossians were all subjects of the Crown by virtue of their connection with a Dependent Territory, although as BDTC's they had no statutory right of abode anywhere in the world.

The Chagossians continued their fight and in 1983 created the Chagos Refugees Group aiming at regrouping all the deported people and fight legally for the retrieving of their home land. After many years of legal fight, after many victories, the British government appealing to gain time, in a historic judgement, in 2000, the UK High Court rules that the removal of the islanders was unlawful. The court states that the present UK government has not attempted to defend the actions in the past.

Following the verdict, Robin Cook, then Foreign Secretary announces that the government will not appeal and the islanders will be allowed to return to at least some of the islands.

In fact the islanders are not permitted to even visit the islands. The UK government claims they cannot return to Diego Garcia due to a "treaty" with the United States, and that return to other islands must be dependant on a

study. In 2003 a different judge denies the islanders any compensation for their unlawful removal. In 2004, the British Government announces through an "order in council" (colonial power allowing it to bypass parliament) that the islanders no longer have a right to live in their homeland. At the same time it states that the result of its study state that the islands are unfit for human habitation however the US maintains its base. The islanders submit a case to the European Court of Human Rights with regard to their deportation (no decision on this yet). The islanders' challenge to the UK "order in council" of 2005 is heard in court.

The 30 March 2006, 500 Chagossians took board on the Mauritius Trochetia for a three days visit to their native island. (<http://www.wanadoo.mu/kinews/a-lile-maurice/societe/117462/un-grand-depart-pour-un-grand-retour.html>)

In 2007, the Court of Appeal (three judges) upholds the quashing of the orders in council, partly on the grounds that the islanders were given a "legitimate expectation" by Robin Cook in 2000 that they could return. However, the government still appeals, this time to the House of Lords.

Now in 2010, the Chagos is regarded by the British Government as potentially one of the largest Marine park of the world. A new challenge stands ahead our islanders. But as Mrs Rita Bancoult said: We were there for centuries, we fished for our living. The sea gives us our food. Who better than we could protect our resources? Aren't their big planes and ships not destroying that marine resource.

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk>

<http://www.commondreams.org>

<http://www.chagosrefugeesgroup.net/history.html>