

DIEGO GARCIA, “...an indispensable platform for policing the world“**

How did Diego Garcia, the largest island in the Chagos Archipelago, east of Madagascar, become one of the most strategic U.S. military bases in the world? Why does it now imperil the African Union’s goal for Africa to be a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone?

The following timeline presents steps leading to the creation of the U.S. base.

1780s On Diego Garcia, an area free from cyclones that frequently devastate Mauritius and nearby islands,* France established fishing settlements and coconut plantations. Laborers were enslaved Africans and indentured Indians.

1814 France ceded Mauritius and Indian Ocean islands, including Diego Garcia, to the U.K.

1835 Slavery was abolished. Workers remained on Diego Garcia. They established thriving villages, owning their own homes, gardens, schools, churches and hospitals...an idyllic way of life.

1958 A Pentagon consultant proposed the “Strategic Island Concept” for U.S. base on Diego Garcia.

1964 U.S. endorsed building a base on Diego Garcia.

1967 An expulsion of residents, begun quietly in 1965 intensified brutally between 1968-1973. The U.K. succeeded in separating Diego Garcia from Mauritius in 1967 and lied to the United Nations that the residents were recent transients. The U.S. military, unknown to Congress, gave \$15 million to the U.K. and 1500-2000 Chagossians were forced into exile to Mauritius or Seychelles where they live in squalor and poor health, dying from diseases, sadness and suicide.

1973 The U.S. built the base to serve reconnaissance planes used in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. \$500 million was spent on construction by Brown & Root (later part of Halliburton). Diego Garcia became a strategic base for the Pentagon, a launching pad for the various wars in the region – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. The base lagoon holds an armada of massive cargo ships with tanks, helicopters, ammunition, fuel and nuclear weaponry. The harbor “can host an aircraft carrier taskforce, including surface vessels and nuclear submarines.”* The airport hosts “B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers, reconnaissance, cargo, and in-air refueling planes.” * The base is a worldwide station for Global Positioning Systems, plus other High-Tech equipment and NASA/satellite facilities. The U.S. 50-year lease runs until 2016.

On Mauritius, Chagos refugees formed opposition groups demanding their right of return and eventually filing lawsuits against the U.K. Over the years their case won three court victories but lost an appeal in the U.K. highest court. Their case is now before the European Court of Human Rights.

2009 In July, when the African Union ratified the Pelindaba Treaty designating the African Continent a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, the issue of nuclear weapons on Diego Garcia was raised. Officially Diego Garcia is considered part of Africa but a question of sovereignty remains unresolved between Mauritius and U.K.

2010 U.K. proposes establishing a Maritime Preservation Area in the Chagos Island, prohibiting fishing should the Chagossians win their right to return to their islands. Arrayed against these forces, it is crucial to support the Chagossians and to ensure Africa’s status as nuclear weapon-free.

*David Vine “Island of Shame” Princeton University Press 2009
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DIEGO GARCIA: A CORAL ISLAND AND REEF SURROUNDING A LAGOON

