

Dirty work in the Indian Ocean

A small island in the middle of the Indian Ocean was of such strategic importance that its whole population was expelled to make way for a military base.

The island of Mauritius, which lies about 500 miles east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, is only 40 miles from north to south and 25 miles from east to west at its widest, yet with a population of over one million is one of the most densely populated areas of the world. Formerly a French colony it was ceded to Britain in 1814.

In 1964, Mauritius was granted self-government; and in March 1968 it became fully independent, but on condition that the British government was allowed to purchase from the newly-independent colony the Chagos Archipelago, which lay 1,500 miles to the northeast, and which had been previously administered from Mauritius. This was forced upon the government of Mauritius despite a UN resolution, passed by the General Assembly in December 1965, which called on Britain "to take no action which would dismember the territory of Mauritius" or "violate its territorial integrity".

Mauritius, like other islands and territories in the Indian Ocean, was all-important to Britain as well as France, South Africa and, later, the United States because of the trade routes, and particularly the Gulf oil tanker routes, possible off-shore oil deposits along the East African coast, and the monitoring of Soviet shipping and submarines. These countries were also much concerned about the spread of what they called "communist subversion" in the area, particularly among young people.

In the defence policy review of 1967, the British government decided to move the naval communications station at HMS Highflyer in Sri Lanka to the town of Vacoas in Mauritius, where it was renamed HMS Mauritius. On obtaining independence in 1968, the Mauritian government signed a defence treaty with Britain, allowing for the continued use of HMS Mauritius. In exchange, Britain trained the island's security forces.

For most of the time since independence, Mauritius has been governed by the Labour Party either alone or in coalition with such parties as the Parti Mauricien Social Democrat (PMSD) or, later, for a short period in 1995, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien ((MMM), led by Paul Berenger.

In December 1976, the hard-line anti-British, nationalist MMM, which from 1970, had only held one seat in the Assembly, won 34 of the 70 seats, and became the largest single party. Only a rather shaky coalition of the Labour and Social Democratic parties kept the MMM from power. With the predictable collapse of this coalition, the MMM achieved power. It joined the non-aligned block of Tanzania, India, the Malagasy Republic (Madagascar) and the Seychelles; and called for the demilitarisation of the Indian Ocean. Mauritius attempted, on a number of occasions (the last time in 1991), to raise the issue of returning the islands and atolls of the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius, but without success.

But why did Britain want to retain control of Chago Archipelago? Officially named the British Indian Ocean Territory in 1965 it is the only British colony created since

decolonisation after the Second World War. In 1814, because of their importance "astride the trade routes to the East", the islands of the Chagos Archipelago were annexed by Britain, and administered as a dependency of Mauritius until 1965.

The population of the islands, when they became the British Indian Ocean Territory in 1965, was around 1,500, of whom most lived on Diego Garcia. They were the Ilois who were descended from slaves introduced to work on the small copra plantations. Most were fifth generation islanders. The new colony was given a flag, a Commissioner, a customs office and a police station. A few Royal Marines were stationed on Diego Garcia. A post office was established; and the Territory even issued its own postage stamps.

The base

In 1966, however Britain signed a "defence" agreement with the United States, leasing the British Indian Ocean Territory to America for 50 years, with an option of a further 20 years. America did not, of course, want the islands for their copra or their fish; and they did not want to establish hotels for tourists. Far from it. They particularly wanted Diego Garcia, with its huge lagoon, as an intelligence, military and naval base and, later, as a nuclear weapons depot and refuelling point for US bombers. As the British discovered in the 19th century, whoever controlled the Chagos Archipelago controlled the Indian Ocean.

There was only one problem for Britain: America required the islands without the people who lived there. Britain had to get rid of them, particularly from Diego Garcia. The evacuation, or to be more accurate, the deportation, of the Ilois began in 1965 and was finally completed before the end of 1972, despite UN articles IX and XIII which state that "no one should be subjected to arbitrary exile". The British government assigned the job of resettling the islanders to the Chagos-Agalega Company, coconut exporters and the only employer on Diego Garcia. They were deported to Mauritius; and the last few remaining islanders were told "if you don't leave you will not be fed". By 1972, the US Defense Department told Congress that "the islands are virtually uninhabited, and erection of the base would thus cause no indigenous political problems".

In December 1974, a joint UK-US memorandum stated that there is "no native population on the islands"; and a British Ministry of Defence spokesman denied that this was a deliberate misrepresentation by saying the "there is nothing in our files about inhabitants or about an evacuation". For Britain and America, the Ilois of the British Indian Ocean Territory had become an *un*people.

In fact, they were dumped in Mauritius, in the words of a Minority Rights Group report by John Madeley, "without any workable settlement; left in abject poverty", and given a tiny amount of compensation on condition that they renounced their rights to return to the islands. By 1980, only a very few owned any land or houses, and 40 percent still had no jobs. Not surprisingly, most still live in Mauritius in poverty.

U.S. priorities

The United States Joint Chiefs-of-Staff first sought the Chagos Archipelago island of Diego Garcia as a base as early as 1959, and persuaded the British to give up the island, and other atolls and islands in the archipelago, from Mauritius prior to independence. In order to finance the base, the US Department of Defence established a secret Polaris Trust Fund (as Britain was unable to pay for the Polaris nuclear missiles for its submarines) to pay for the leased base rights. The money from the Trust Fund was then deducted from Britain's Polaris research and development costs, set at five percent.

The first American contingent moved on to Diego Garcia in 1971; and the first US project was to establish a naval Signals Intelligence (SIGNIT) station to monitor radio signals in the Indian Ocean. With British Royal Navy participation, a United States National Security Group monitoring station was set up in 1972. It became a "ground control" base for the US-Australian-British CLASSIC WIZARD Ocean Surveillance Satellite System network for electronic satellites. Also set up, in 1974, was a major GCHQ/NSA Signals Intelligence station. Of the facilities, Jeffrey Richelson and Desmond Ball observe: "Not only is Diego Garcia ideally situated for monitoring naval traffic in the Indian Ocean, but during the 1970s, it also acquired many functions previously performed by the NSA facility at Kagnew station, at Asmara in Ethiopia" (*The Ties That Bind*, Sydney, Australia, p.205), abandoned because of the civil wars raging in that part of Africa.

A second US-UK treaty, in 1972, sanctioned the "limited naval communications facility". A US airstrip and port facilities were developed; and access to Diego Garcia was restricted to British and American military personnel and civilian construction workers. In 1976, a third treaty regularised the construction of an "anchorage, airfield, support and supply elements and ancillary services". Aircraft using Diego Garcia have included RAF Hawker Siddeley Nimrod MR2 marine reconnaissance aircraft, Lockheed P-3 Orion transport aircraft, and USAAF Boeing B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers capable of carrying nuclear devices stored on the island. During the 1991 war against Iraq, Diego Garcia was used as a refuelling point for US bombers.

During the recent crisis, the British Indian Ocean Territory was once again an important base for military operations. Yet more dirty work in the Indian Ocean.

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Source: [Socialist Party, Peter E. Newell](#).