

Diego Garcia: Paradise Cleansed

by John Pilger

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There are times when one tragedy, one crime tells us how a whole system works behind its democratic facade and helps us to understand how much of the world is run for the benefit of the powerful and how governments lie. To understand the catastrophe of Iraq, and all the other Iraqs along imperial history's trail of blood and tears, one need look no further than Diego Garcia.

The story of Diego Garcia is shocking, almost incredible. A British colony lying midway between Africa and Asia in the Indian Ocean, the island is one of 64 unique coral islands that form the Chagos Archipelago, a phenomenon of natural beauty, and once of peace. Newsreaders refer to it in passing: "American B-52 and Stealth bombers last night took off from the uninhabited British island of Diego Garcia to bomb Iraq (or Afghanistan)." It is the word "uninhabited" that turns the key on the horror of what was done there. In the 1970s, the Ministry of Defense in London produced this epic lie: "There is nothing in our files about a population and an evacuation."

Diego Garcia was first settled in the late 18th century. At least 2,000 people lived there: a gentle Creole nation with thriving villages, a school, a hospital, a church, a prison, a railway, docks, a copra plantation. Watching a film shot by missionaries in the 1960s, I can understand why every Chagos islander I have met calls it paradise; there is a grainy sequence where the islanders' beloved dogs are swimming in the sheltered, palm-fringed lagoon, catching fish.

All this began to end when an American rear admiral stepped ashore in 1961 and Diego Garcia was marked as the site of what is today one of the biggest American bases in the world. There are now more than 2,000 troops, anchorage for 30 warships, a nuclear dump, a satellite spy station, shopping malls, bars and a golf course. "Camp Justice," the Americans call it.

During the 1960s, in high secrecy, the Labor government of Harold Wilson conspired with two American administrations to "sweep" and "sanitize" the islands: the words used in

American documents. Files found in the National Archives in Washington and the Public Record Office in London provide an astonishing narrative of official lying all too familiar to those who have chronicled the lies over Iraq.

To get rid of the population, the Foreign Office invented the fiction that the islanders were merely transient contract workers who could be "returned" to Mauritius, 1,000 miles away. In fact, many islanders traced their ancestry back five generations, as their cemeteries bore witness. The aim, wrote a Foreign Office official in January 1966, "is to convert all the existing residents ... into short-term, temporary residents."

What the files also reveal is an imperious attitude of brutality. In August 1966, Sir Paul Gore-Booth, permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, wrote: "We must surely be very tough about this. The object of the exercise was to get some rocks that will remain ours. There will be no indigenous population except seagulls." At the end of this is a handwritten note by D.H. Greenhill, later Baron Greenhill: "Along with the Birds go some Tarzans or Men Fridays ..." Under the heading, "Maintaining the fiction," another official urges his colleagues to reclassify the islanders as "a floating population" and to "make up the rules as we go along."

There is not a word of concern for their victims. Only one official appeared to worry about being caught, writing that it was "fairly unsatisfactory" that "we propose to certify the people, more or less fraudulently, as belonging somewhere else." The documents leave no doubt that the cover-up was approved by the prime minister and at least three cabinet ministers.

At first, the islanders were tricked and intimidated into leaving; those who had gone to Mauritius for urgent medical treatment were prevented from returning. As the Americans began to arrive and build the base, Sir Bruce Greatbatch, the governor of the Seychelles, who had been put in charge of the "sanitizing," ordered all the pet dogs on Diego Garcia to be killed. Almost 1,000 pets were rounded up and

gassed, using the exhaust fumes from American military vehicles. "They put the dogs in a furnace where the people worked," says Lizette Tallatte, now in her 60s," ... and when their dogs were taken away in front of them, our children screamed and cried."

The islanders took this as a warning; and the remaining population were loaded on to ships, allowed to take only one suitcase. They left behind their homes and furniture, and their lives. On one journey in rough seas, the copra company's horses occupied the deck, while women and children were forced to sleep on a cargo of bird fertilizer. Arriving in the Seychelles, they were marched up the hill to a prison where they were held until they were transported to Mauritius. There, they were dumped on the docks.

In the first months of their exile, as they fought to survive, suicides and child deaths were common. Lizette lost two children. "The doctor said he cannot treat sadness," she recalls. Rita Bancoult, now 79, lost two daughters and a son; she told me that when her husband was told the family could never return home, he suffered a stroke and died. Unemployment, drugs and prostitution, all of which had been alien to their society, ravaged them. Only after more than a decade did they receive any compensation from the British government: less than £3,000 each, which did not cover their debts.

The behavior of the Blair government is, in many respects, the worst. In 2000, the islanders won a historic victory in the high court, which ruled their expulsion illegal. Within hours of the judgment, the Foreign Office announced that it would not be possible for them to return to Diego Garcia because of a "treaty" with Washington – in truth, a deal concealed from

parliament and the U.S. Congress. As for the other islands in the group, a "feasibility study" would determine whether these could be resettled. This has been described by Professor David Stoddart, a world authority on the Chagos, as "worthless" and "an elaborate charade." The "study" consulted not a single islander; it found that the islands were "sinking," which was news to the Americans who are building more and more base facilities; the U.S. Navy describes the living conditions as so outstanding that they are "unbelievable."

In 2003, in a now notorious follow-up high court case, the islanders were denied compensation, with government counsel allowed by the judge to attack and humiliate them in the witness box, and with Justice Ousley referring to "we" as if the court and the Foreign Office were on the same side. Last June, the government invoked the archaic royal prerogative in order to crush the 2000 judgment. A decree was issued that the islanders were banned forever from returning home. These were the same totalitarian powers used to expel them in secret 40 years ago; Blair used them to authorize his illegal attack on Iraq.

Led by a remarkable man, Olivier Bancoult, an electrician, and supported by a tenacious and valiant London lawyer, Richard Gifford, the islanders are going to the European court of human rights, and perhaps beyond. Article 7 of the statute of the international criminal court describes the "deportation or forcible transfer of population ... by expulsion or other coercive acts" as a crime against humanity. As Bush's bombers take off from their paradise, the Chagos islanders, says Bancoult, "will not let this great crime stand. The world is changing; we will win."