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'Tug of war': Chagos Islands deal tearing families apart in Mauritius

Mauritius awaits Trump's approval for the UK to hand over the archipelago, with Chagossians at odds over what's in it for them.



Slam poet Geraldine Baptiste recites stories about her Chagossian elders, expelled from their island homes in the late 1960s and early 70s [Courtesy of Geraldine Baptiste]

By **Lorraine Mallinder**

11 Feb 2025



Slam poet Geraldine Baptiste pulls no punches when telling the story of her “Granpapa”, one of the 1,500-plus people ripped from a peaceful existence on the Chagos Islands by the British to make way for a United States military base, most shipped “kouma zaimo”

(meaning “like animals” in her native Creole) to a hellish fate more than a thousand miles across the Indian Ocean in Mauritius.

Belting out her poems in the Port Louis suburbs, the 26-year-old relates her grandfather’s memories of fishing in the crystalline waters of Peros Banhos atoll and feasting by firelight on “seraz pwason” (fish curry) and “kalou” moonshine, contrasting happy times with the horrors of his violent expulsion in the early 1970s and the decades of impoverished exile that followed – many did not survive.

“Pena okenn antidot; Pou geri sa blesir; Ki ankor pe soupire,” she says – there is no cure for those wounds, still weeping more than half a century on.

That line hits especially hard right now, as Mauritius prepares to assume [sovereignty](#) over the 60-island Chagos archipelago after vanquishing the [United Kingdom](#) in a landmark decolonisation case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) six years ago. The nation is on a knife edge as it awaits the final nod from the US, which wants cast-iron guarantees on the security of one of its most valuable bases on the atoll of [Diego Garcia](#).

Mauritius has been intent on reclaiming Chagos for decades, having been strong-armed by the UK into selling the jointly administered colonial territory for 3 million pounds in exchange for its independence in 1968. The ICJ victory is further sweetened by the promise of billions of pounds that the UK will reportedly pay in rent and back rent for Diego Garcia under a lease arrangement spanning 99 years.

In a bid to heal past wounds, Mauritius will manage a trust fund for Chagossians, allowing them to resettle on two of the Chagos Islands – Salomon and Peros Banhos. But the islanders, some with roots on the territory stretching back to the 18th century, were locked out of the interstate talks. And, as Baptiste describes it, local families have been torn apart by rows over whether they should accept Mauritian sovereignty over their homeland.

“It’s like being in a tug of war between two sides that are killing each other,” says Baptiste. “We’re already a tiny community. It makes me so sad.”

Sidelined

Karen Walter, deputy editor-in-chief of Mauritius’s L’Express newspaper, has followed the twists and turns of the bilateral negotiations in recent years, noting that the views of the estimated 10,000 Chagossians now scattered across the UK, Mauritius and the Seychelles “have not counted for much”.

The sidelining of Chagossians was apparent during last year’s [election](#), held 10 days after the UK and Mauritius announced they had reached a political agreement on the transfer. Former Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth hit the campaign trail running, trumpeting “billions of rupees” in annual rent for Diego Garcia and opportunities to build hotels on the archipelago – but many noted he made no mention of Chagossians.

Jugnauth has since been replaced by [Navin Ramgoolam](#), who condemned his predecessor’s draft deal with the UK as a “sellout”. Last Tuesday, Ramgoolam told the Mauritian parliament that his new team had renegotiated an “inflation-proof” draft, featuring an undisclosed “front-loaded” payment. Crucially for Mauritius, the new terms appear to give it veto powers over future extensions of the 99-year lease arrangement for Diego Garcia.

Ramgoolam said he was “confident” everything would be finalised “in the coming weeks”. Though with US President Donald Trump yet to weigh in, as hawkish right-wingers whip up a transatlantic panic about Mauritius opening the door to Chinese spies (even if “Little India”, as Mauritius is sometimes called because of its large Indian-origin population, is far closer to New Delhi than it has ever been to Beijing), the deal still hangs in the balance.

Ramgoolam kick-started the legal drive for sovereignty after WikiLeaks published a US diplomatic cable in 2010, exposing a British scheme to establish a marine-protected zone in Chagos that

was aimed at greenwashing the ban on Indigenous islanders – or “Man Fridays”, as they were called by one official – returning home. From then on, the two causes of Mauritian sovereignty over Chagos and the Chagossian struggle for justice were twinned.

The country’s eventual victory at the ICJ may have been predicated on the UK’s botched decolonisation of Mauritius, but Chagossians provided the knockout emotional punch. Peros Banhos native Liseby Elyse testified over a videolink, telling the stunned court how she had been crammed onto the eviction ship while four months pregnant and had lost her baby on arrival in Mauritius, swinging international opinion in favour of Mauritius.

Mauritian lawyer Robin Mardemootoo, who has long represented the community, says Mauritius owes its victory at the ICJ to Chagossians. Having “surfied the waves” of the Chagossian struggle, Mauritius now has “a golden opportunity” to do things the right way and should insist they have a place at the table, he says.

Apart from anything else, Chagossians are best placed to hold the UK and US feet to the fire, particularly when it comes to proper reparations for the wrongs committed by both countries and the costs of the planned resettlement programme, a mammoth project involving the construction of infrastructure, institutions and housing on islands untouched for half a century. Mauritius does not have the means, says Mardemootoo.

“If Mauritius is not smart about this, it is going to inherit a bunch of islands with no means to rehabilitate them. And this is going to drag on and come back and haunt them,” he says.

Time running out

Olivier Bancoult, leader of the Chagos Refugees Group (CRG), solicited Mardemootoo’s help in his long battle to win a right of return in the English courts. He secured a landmark victory at the High Court in London in 2000, but the ruling was overturned with

new legislation four years later amid the panic over the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Having reached a legal dead end in the UK, the 60-year-old Peros Banhos native opted to back Mauritian sovereignty. Though his group has been excluded from talks, he says he has received regular briefings from the previous and current prime ministers, with discussions including Chagossian participation in regional governance.

“They will offer resettlement. How could I oppose that even if it is not 100 percent satisfactory?” he says, speaking from his group’s headquarters in Pointe aux Sables.



Olivier Bancoult at the Chagos Refugees Group headquarters in Pointe aux Sables [Lorraine Mallinder/Al Jazeera]

He believes that time is running out for first-generation Chagossians like himself to achieve justice – the youngest is now 52, while the oldest is nudging 100.

“They are just hoping to have their dream realised,” he says.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Claudette Lefade, leader of Chagos Asylum People (CAP), wants Trump to sink the deal. She is fighting for Chagossian self-determination under the British flag – even if the former colonial power has repeatedly let down the community.

Lefade, also born in Peros Banhos, sees the trust fund that Mauritius is supposed to manage under the deal as a British ruse to avoid paying proper reparations. The UK already has form on that front, having failed to deliver on a 2016 promise to distribute 40 million pounds (\$49.7m) to Chagossians around the world.

But she suspects Chagossians will fare even worse under Mauritian rule, harking to alleged mismanagement of previous funds sent by the UK in 1972 and 1982, which resulted in tardy, meagre payouts. Given the lack of transparency in relation to the handover, she also fears groups that are not close to the government may find themselves out in the cold when it comes to the resettlement and trust fund schemes.

Exodus

A recent report by L’Express covered the grinding poverty experienced by Chagossians in the coastal village of Baie-du-Tombeau, where some still live in “lakaz tol” – corrugated iron houses. “The poverty is glaring, some manage to make ends meet, but some don’t,” says Walter.

On the street, people speak of an “exodus”, as struggling Chagossians rush to take the UK up on its offer of citizenship for all native-born Chagossians and their descendants – belatedly granted in 2022. Lefade says two groups totalling 100 will leave next month.

Overall figures on departures are not available, but authorities in the town of Crawley in the UK, home to a 3,500-strong Chagossian community, reported a “marked increase” in new arrivals last year.

Baptiste keeps getting messages from fellow Chagossians asking for help with applications. England may be considered the “bouro” – the torturer – for its mass deportation of her people, described by rights groups as a “crime against humanity”, but she has witnessed “young people and even families with children” leaving in a bid to better their lot.

Though she has no plans to leave Mauritius, she gets it. Her own “Granpapa”, 70-year-old Roselin Permal, would be “six feet under” had he not left for Crawley some 15 years ago to get an operation on his heart, she says. Right now, her younger sister is looking to join him.



Jamel Colin plans to move to the UK, seeing it as a stepping stone to Chagossian self-determination [Courtesy of Jamel Colin]

Jamel Colin, a 46-year-old mime artist, is currently applying for British citizenship for himself and his 12-year-old daughter, seeing

the UK as a better stepping stone to self-determination than Mauritius.

He hopes the UK's lease on Diego Garcia will enable Chagossians to gain a foothold in their ancestral territory, where they can then stake a sovereignty claim as an Indigenous people.

"I was born in exile, but I know where I come from and who I am," he says.

However, the CRG's Bancoult warns that the quest for justice will get harder as the first generation of native islanders dies out. "It's more powerful when Chagossian natives are talking about what wrong was done to them and what [governments] need to do to correct it," he says.

He thinks younger Chagossians looking to the UK for a solution are making a mistake. "The UK government will say: 'You are not stateless. You were born in Mauritius. You were born in the UK.'

"They will say: 'We don't have to deal with you.'"

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA