

CHAGOS ISLANDS JUSTICE AT LAST?

Mauritius is gearing up to take control of the Chagos Islands after winning a long-running legal battle with Britain. The two countries announced the handover in October and are now hammering out a treaty that will secure the future of the US's military base on the atoll of Diego Garcia.

But the fate of the original islanders, kicked out by Britain to make way for the base more than 50 years ago, still hangs in the balance. While Mauritius will allow Chagossians to finally go home – as long as they stay away from Diego Garcia – the community's views on the takeover vary widely. Having been excluded from the talks so far, many fear that their futures are once again being decided over their heads.

Britain evicted around 1,500 islanders between 1967 and 1973, classifying them as transient 'contract workers' in a bid to sever their ancestral ties to their homeland. Herded onto ships, the islanders were dumped in nearby Mauritius and the Seychelles, enduring a painful exile marked by poverty and marginalization. Thousands later moved to Britain.

Today, Chagossians number around 10,000 worldwide, scattered between Britain, the Seychelles and Mauritius.

'The scars of exile run deep in the community,' says Frankie Bontemps, a leader of advocacy group Chagossian Voices in England. Chagossian Voices wants the islanders to be recognized as an Indigenous people with rights to self-determination and proper reparations. 'We need our voices to be heard,' says Bontemps. 'There should be a referendum with all the diaspora voting.'

Others like the Mauritius-based Chagos Refugees Group

(CRG), led by Olivier Bancoult, support Port Louis in its bid for sovereignty. Mauritius had given up its claim for £3 million (\$3.7m) while seeking independence from Britain in 1965, later claiming that it had effectively been swindled out of the territory.

Bancoult sees Mauritian sovereignty as the best way forward for his people and has worked closely with the government throughout talks. While disappointed that Diego Garcia, the largest of the islands, will be off-limits, he believes Chagossians can play a role in an autonomous regional government and welcomes Britain's promise to create a trust fund.

Not all Chagossians in Mauritius agree. Claudette Pauline Lefade, leader of Chagos Asylum People, sees the fund as a poor substitute for proper reparations. 'We're not Tarzans and Man Fridays,' she says. 'They need to recognize we are a people. We can manage our own country.'

Chagossians in the Seychelles feel similarly. Pierre Prosper, leader of Chagossian Committee Seychelles, is racing to secure stakes in talks before it is too late. He is particularly worried about official statements suggesting that only Chagossians with Mauritian citizenship will be able to return to live on the islands, a restriction that may prove difficult to lift once it is in place. 'This is a window that's closing. Basically we have to be heard now,' he says.

Prosper claims that most Chagossians around the world are 'disappointed and very wary' of the handover. 'It's a complete repetition of the past.'

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