
DIEGO GARCIA - A HOME OR A MILITARY ASSET?

WHERE IS DIEGO GARCIA AND WHO LIVED THERE?



Diego Garcia is an island in the middle of the Indian ocean in the Chagos Archipelago very close to the Equator. Diego Garcia is the largest island in the group, shaped like a footprint and is very low and flat; the average height above sea level is just four feet.

Diego Garcia is the homeland of the Illois people but none of them still live there. The island was discovered by Portuguese explorers in the 1500s. From 1965 it became part of the new British Indian Ocean Territory. It was bought by the British Government from Mauritius as a condition of granting Mauritian independence, and quickly leased to the U.S. as a military base for 50 – 70 years. This broke a United Nations Resolution.

The 1,500 islanders on Diego Garcia and nearby islands (Chagossians) were forced to move from their homes between 1967 and 1973 because the U.S. thought that the island was a perfect place to build a new military base. One of the islanders describes what happened: *"We were assembled in front of the manager's house, and informed that we could no longer stay on the island because the Americans were coming for good. We didn't want to go. We were born here. So were our fathers and forefathers who were buried in that land."*

Some of the Illois were tricked into leaving the island. Some were told by the British government that they did not have residence rights. Others visited Mauritius and then weren't allowed to come back. Other islanders who would not leave were simply taken by force.

WHY IS DIEGO GARCIA IMPORTANT TO THE U.S.?

Diego Garcia is very valuable to the U.S. Military. But why? During the Cold War, Diego Garcia was the perfect place for the Americans to keep watch over Russia and was used as a nuclear base with Cruise Missiles. More recently, it has served as a base for B-52 bombers, which have been used to attack Iraq and Afghanistan. Diego Garcia is more than 3,000 miles south of Iraq but that isn't a problem because the bombers can travel for up to 8,000 miles without refuelling. At the moment, Diego Garcia also has a camp to hold suspected terrorists. This camp is even more secretive than the camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. An islander has said, in an interview in London in 2002:

"Our birthplace is being used to kill innocent people. We can't give any backing to what is happening on Diego Garcia, like B-52s attacking Afghanistan."

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE ISLANDERS?

When Britain depopulated the Island, most of the Chagossians were moved to slums in Mauritius while others were deported to the Seychelles. Many of them

died, some from starvation because they had no income, while others committed suicide. The surviving islanders and their families, many of whom were born since the eviction, have been fighting in court in London and in the US for compensation and the right to return. In 2000, the islanders won a court case against the British Government, which meant they could return to the Archipelago if they wanted. The U.S. didn't want the islanders to return. In a letter to the Foreign Office, the US State Department said that resettling Diego Garcia and the surrounding islands *"would significantly downgrade the strategic importance of a vital military asset."* After this, the Foreign Office decided that the cost of returning the islanders would be too great.

The islanders took their case to the High Court, but on 19th October, they lost their appeal for compensation and the right to return to their homes. The judge, Justice Duncan Ouseley, said that although they had been mistreated, there was no point in carrying on a case they were clearly not going to win.

Ever since the eviction, British Governments have kept the truth about Diego Garcia almost totally secret. A Ministry of Defence spokesman said: *"There is nothing in our files about inhabitants or about an evacuation."* The Foreign Office website used to state that there were *"no indigenous inhabitants on the island."* Then, a few months ago, it changed, and now admits there was once a *"settled population"*.

There has been nothing on the television and hardly anything in the newspapers until the most recent court case.

COMMENT

In my opinion, what the Chagossians have gone through is appalling. The islanders have been pushed about, tricked out of their homes and ignored all because the US Military felt that they could do with a base on Diego Garcia. Our government and the US don't care at all about the rights of the Chagossians. I think that people should be informed about what is happening and about the lies told by the Government. The people of Diego Garcia have been through enough and should be given back their land.

