



The Hague International Model United Nations

Forum: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (GA4)

Issue: The Situation on Chagos Islands

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Introduction

"The agreement completes the total process of decolonisation."¹ - Mauritius's Prime Minister, Navin Ramgoolam. On the 22nd of May, 2025, the United Kingdom (UK) and Mauritius signed an agreement, through which full sovereignty of the Chagos Islands was transferred to the government of Mauritius². While this deal removed control of the UK over the area, it allowed the UK and the United States (US) to retain their rights over Diego Garcia, under a long-term lease, securing a difficult but pivotal solution after decades of dispute.

The Chagos Archipelago is a group of 58 islands, which are located in the central Indian Ocean.³ The Chagos Archipelago, together with the Islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues, Agalega, Tromelin and Cargados Carajos, formed the Republic of Mauritius in 1715, when it became a French colony and known as "Île de France".⁴ The islands were ceded by France to Britain in 1810, but in 1965, just three years before Mauritius gained its independence, they were then split out from Mauritius and formed the British Indian Ocean Territory. As a result, between 1967 and 1973, the indigenous Chagossian population was forcibly removed from their islands, which marked a significant and painful chapter in the archipelago's history.⁵

The archipelago is known for its rich biodiversity and coral reefs, but most importantly for its strategic military significance. Diego Garcia is the largest of the Chagos Islands and hosts a major joint UK-US military base. Its significance derives mainly from its geography, as it allows monitoring across the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and parts of Africa and Asia.⁶ The base played a vital role in major military operations and remains one of the most important secretive military installations in the world.

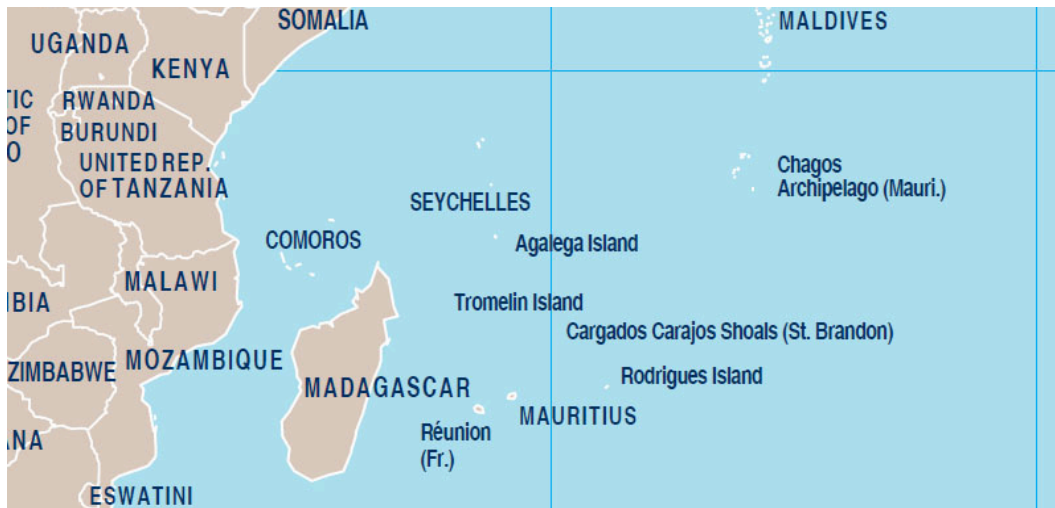


Figure 1: Chagos Archipelago depicted as Mauritian territory by new UN world map⁷

The dispute presents implications that go beyond just land ownership. Strategically, the islands' central position in the Indian Ocean makes them important for global military and security interests. On the human side, the islands' depopulation in the 1960s -1970s to facilitate military use has sparked ongoing sovereignty and decolonization disputes. At the same time, protecting the rich environment of the islands amid political changes is also a major concern.

Lastly, the topic should be addressed under the theme of “Culture & Heritage: Embracing Diversity”. The story of the Chagos Islands is deeply rooted in culture and identity. Even after being forced from their homeland, Chagossians have worked hard to keep their traditions alive. In Mauritius and across the world, they gather to celebrate this heritage that carries their history and hope.⁸

Definition of Key Terms

British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)

“The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), an archipelago of 58 islands covering some 640,000 sq km of ocean, is a British Overseas Territory. It is administered from London and is located approximately halfway between East Africa and Indonesia.”⁹

Decolonisation

Decolonization is “the process in which a country that was previously a colony (= controlled by another country) becomes politically independent”¹⁰. In this context, it refers to the ending of the United Kingdom’s administration of the Chagos Islands and restoring Mauritian sovereignty.

Self-Determination

“Self-determination is a political principle asserting the right of nations to govern themselves independently, influencing both domestic and foreign policies.”¹¹ In the context of the Chagos Islands dispute, self-determination refers to the right of the Chagossian people to freely determine their political status and decide their future.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is defined as the “supreme authority within a territory”.¹² In this context, the term refers to the legal and political authority to exercise control and governance over the Chagos Archipelago.

Background Information

Historical background

In the late 18th century enslaved people from Africa were brought to work on the coconut plantations in the Indian Ocean’s Chagos Archipelago. Along with laborers from India, they formed a unique Creole society, which became known as Chagossians or Ilois, on Diego Gracia, which was the largest island, and included hospitals, schools, and churches.¹³ As a result, the community enjoyed a stable life with guaranteed employment and access to natural resources. In 1715, the islands became part of the French colony and were called “Île de France”. Mauritius became an important stop point for the trading routes between France and the southeast coast of India, where the country had imperial interests.¹⁴ In December 1810, British forces captured the island of Mauritius, and so the Chagos Archipelago was ceded to British control.¹⁵ For most of the colonial period, the Chagos were administered as a dependency of Mauritius.

However, the situation changed drastically in 1965, just three years before Mauritius gained its independence, following a secret agreement between the US and the UK, motivated by strategic defense interests, the Chagos Archipelago was separated from Mauritius to form the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT).¹⁶ The Chagossians were removed from their homeland to make way for a military base on Diego Garcia, however the evacuation, as described in the Human Rights Watch report titled “That’s When the Nightmare Started”¹⁷ was carried out brutally, as many islanders were left stranded in Mauritius and the Seychelles, facing inadequate housing, sanitation, or access to essential services and suffering from poor health and education, discrimination, and daily hardships. The British government offered \$3 million to Mauritius and a \$4 million trust fund for the displaced. However, these measures failed to address the deep economic and social consequences. Despite all the struggles, the Chagossians fought for recognition and justice.¹⁸ At the start of the 1970s, they organized hunger strikes

and took legal action against the British government, through which they gained some recognition of the illegality of their removal, but received limited support for resettlement.

Over the years, the Chagossians launched multiple lawsuits in the UK and the US, seeking their right to return and acknowledgement of human rights abuses. In 2000, the British High Court declared their removal unlawful and allowed their return to the islands, excluding Diego Garcia which remained a military base ¹⁹. Though support is still limited, global awareness and advocacy have grown, through resolutions created by the European Parliament and the African Union.

In recent years, there is new international pressure on the UK and the US government, especially after the 2015 UN court rulings declaring the UK's creation of a marine protected area over the islands unlawful. This ruling exposed that the UK had illegally established the protected area without consulting Mauritius, which violated international law ²⁰. Building on this momentum, diplomatic engagements intensified, resulting in the May 22, 2025 agreement.²¹

Studies indicated that resettlement is feasible. However, the military base remains a major obstacle, while diplomatic negotiations continue amid the interests of security, sovereignty, and human rights. For the Chagossians, the struggle for justice and return remains ongoing, and it is rooted deeply in their longing for home and acknowledgment of past wrongs.

Diego Garcia

Diego Garcia is the largest island in the Chagos Archipelago and it plays a key role in the strategic military landscape of the Indian Ocean. Its importance derives mainly from its geography. The island is located centrally in a vital waterway, and allows monitoring and rapid access to three important points: the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. Diego Garcia also supports critical US and UK military operations. Since the forced removal of its indigenous population, the island has remained uninhabited by civilians, while its deep natural harbor and expansive airfield allow it to accommodate many naval and air force operations. This includes serving as a launch point for major conflicts such as the Gulf War and operations in Afghanistan.²² The existence of this military base reinforces the US's influence in the region, while the island is increasingly shaped by great power competition, especially with China's growing presence. Additionally, it complicates ongoing sovereignty disputes and poses challenges for the potential resettlement of Chagossians, as diplomatic negotiations over the island continue even after the May 2025 agreement.



Figure II: Diego Garcia Map²³

Current Developments

Even though the 22 May 2025 agreement transferred sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius today, displaced Chagossians still lack unrestricted access and full self-determination, consultations and reparations efforts are still insufficient, environmental safeguards remain untested amid base activities, and geopolitical tensions risk new frictions over the lease terms.

Since the announcement of the agreement, these unresolved issues have sparked demonstrations and public criticism, particularly from Chagossian communities who argue that they were not adequately consulted and that their right of return remains limited in practice. Furthermore, domestic approval procedures for the treaty are still ongoing, and it has not yet been fully ratified, reflecting both political sensitivities and continued debate over the balance between security, justice for displaced islanders, and long-term environmental protection.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

UN and International involvement

The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 2019 which recognized the Chagos Archipelago as part of the sovereign territory of Mauritius²⁴. This reinforced global support for Mauritius's claims. Additionally, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion which declared the UK's continued control over the islands unlawful, and urged an end to colonial administration²⁵. At the same time, the Permanent Court of Arbitration supported Mauritius's sovereignty in rulings related to the marine protected area dispute²⁶. The UN has consistently called on the UK to support decolonization efforts and respect Mauritius's sovereignty, while building a broad international backing for Mauritius in legal and diplomatic arenas.

Mauritius

Mauritius has asserted its sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago for centuries and sought the return of the islands along with resettlement rights for displaced Chagossians. It has been engaged in decades of diplomatic and legal battles to reclaim jurisdiction, which finally culminated in the 2025 agreement with the UK, which formally transferred sovereignty to Mauritius while allowing a long-term lease for the military base on Diego Garcia. Mauritius continues to press for reparations and the right of return for the Chagossian community.

United Kingdom (UK)

The United Kingdom claimed the Chagos Archipelago in 1810 as a colony. In 1965, they administered the islands as the British Indian Ocean Territory, and initially rejected Mauritius's sovereignty claims. However, after facing mounting international pressure, the UK agreed to transfer sovereignty through the 2025 agreement, but retained control over the Diego Garcia military base through a lease. The UK government still faces criticism over the forced removal of Chagossians and ongoing environmental controversies related to the archipelago.²⁷

United States of America (USA)

The United States operates the military base on Diego Garcia based on an agreement with the UK. The US has a strategic interest in maintaining a strong presence in the Indian Ocean region and supports the UK-Mauritius agreement as it balances sovereignty transfer with continued military access. The US's involvement adds a layer of complexity to the sovereignty dispute, as it requires assurances for Diego Garcia's continued operation as a critical logistics hub for US bombers, naval forces, and regional operations, influencing the 2025 UK-Mauritius deal's terms.²⁸

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1715	Islands become part of the French colony known as Île de France
April 27 th , 1786	Chagos Islands and Diego Garcia claimed for Great Britain
December 1810	Chagos Archipelago ceded to British control and administered as a dependency of Mauritius
November 8 th , 1965	British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) formally created, separating Chagos from Mauritius
1965 - 1973	Forced removal of Chagossians to make way for US-UK military base on Diego Garcia

November 2000	British High Court rules Chagossian removal unlawful and permits return, except to Diego Garcia
March 18 th , 2015	UN court rules UK's marine protected area over Chagos unlawful
May 22 nd , 2025	UK-Mauritius agreement signed, officially transferring sovereignty of Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius, while retaining military base lease on Diego Garcia

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

2019 International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion ²⁹

In 2019, the International Court of Justice determined that the UK's excision of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius was unlawful. The British administration was deemed illegal and the UK was urged to cease control of the islands. The ruling was supported by a 13-1 majority and called all UN member states to cooperate actively in the process of decolonization. This reinforced Mauritius's sovereignty claims over the archipelago.

2025 UK-Mauritius Chagos Agreement ³⁰

Building on the 2019 ICJ Advisory Opinion, on the 22nd of May, 2025, the UK and Mauritius signed an important agreement, which transferred sovereignty of the Chagos islands back to Mauritius. However, the agreement allowed the UK and the US to maintain operations on Diego Garcia under a lease for an initial term of 99 years. The treaty also established a 24-mile exclusion zone around Diego Garcia, which will restrict construction without the UK's consent, and forbid foreign military and civilian forces from other islands. While it includes financial compensation and environmental protections, there remains criticism concerning the adequacy of the provisions for the displaced Chagossians, and legal disputes continue over consultation processes before the transfer. Although it is a diplomatic milestone, tensions about human rights and military presence persist.

Possible Solutions

Sovereignty transfer with protections

Even though the 2025 UK-Mauritius Agreement secured the full transfer of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago back to Mauritius, establishing a detailed framework to implement the treaty remains vital. This framework should clarify the management and limits of military base operations and development rights to prevent future misunderstandings. Additionally, it should address potential diplomatic challenges that occur from the military presence, and ensure the ongoing cooperation and communication. Besides that, this framework would clarify military limits and foster cooperation with

human rights monitoring mechanisms, such as independent inspections and complaint procedures, in order to ensure compliance with international human rights standards, agreement lease terms, and Chagossian self-determination rights. However, in the implementation of this solution, it is important to consider the possible diplomatic friction that may occur due to overlapping authorities.

Reparations and resettlement rights for Chagossians

A crucial measure that should be implemented is ensuring financial compensation, social support, and guaranteed rights for the displaced Chagossians to return and resettle in their islands. This measure requires creating a dedicated reparations fund managed jointly by Mauritius, the UK, and community representatives, which will provide financial compensation and support for infrastructure development. Additionally, ongoing consultations should be institutionalized through advisory councils or forums, while investments in housing, health, education, and employment programs are also vital. Also, military personnel training on community rights and transparent channels are also vital to build trust between military authorities and the Chagossian communities. However, resettlement efforts may be complicated by security concerns around military zones. Also, political sensitivities could delay or limit the meaningful restoration of Chagossian rights despite formal guarantees.

Chagossian Self-Determination Framework

Since the exclusion of Chagossians from key decisions is a core problem in this dispute, setting up a formal Chagossian council with real decision-making power is crucial. Specifically, this council would be responsible for protecting cultural sites, running heritage programs, and setting timelines for families returning to the outer islands. This would let returning Chagossians to have a strong voice so that their traditions and identity are always prioritized. It builds on their long fight for recognition, giving a structured way to weigh in on everything from island access rules to how history gets taught back home. However, acknowledging exactly what powers this council gets could take a long time, as sensitivities from the past displacements and the need to balance them with security considerations for the military base could lead to extended discussions among stakeholders.

Environmental conservation and cooperation

Strong collaborative efforts between Mauritius, the UK, and international organizations can protect the archipelago's biodiversity and ecosystems by tackling military impacts and development pressures. Sustainable environmental management can be ensured by forming a multi-stakeholder environmental council with representatives from Mauritius, the UK, international conservation NGOs, and scientific experts. This council would develop conservation guidelines balancing ecosystem protection with military and economic activities. Joint funding could support conservation projects, scientific research, and habitat restoration. Also, environmental impact assessments could be conducted before any development or military operation, while transparency and community engagement would ensure that conservation efforts incorporate local knowledge and priorities, fostering shared stewardship.

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