

# Diego Garcia: a contrast to the Falklands

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- To help prevent, through publicity about violations of human rights, such problems from developing into dangerous and destructive conflicts which, when polarised, are very difficult to resolve; and
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# Diego Garcia: a contrast to the Falklands

by **John Madeley**

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*The cover photograph, by John Madeley, is of Mr Imag Elphezea, a blind man from the Chagos Islands, playing his tambourine in Mauritius.*

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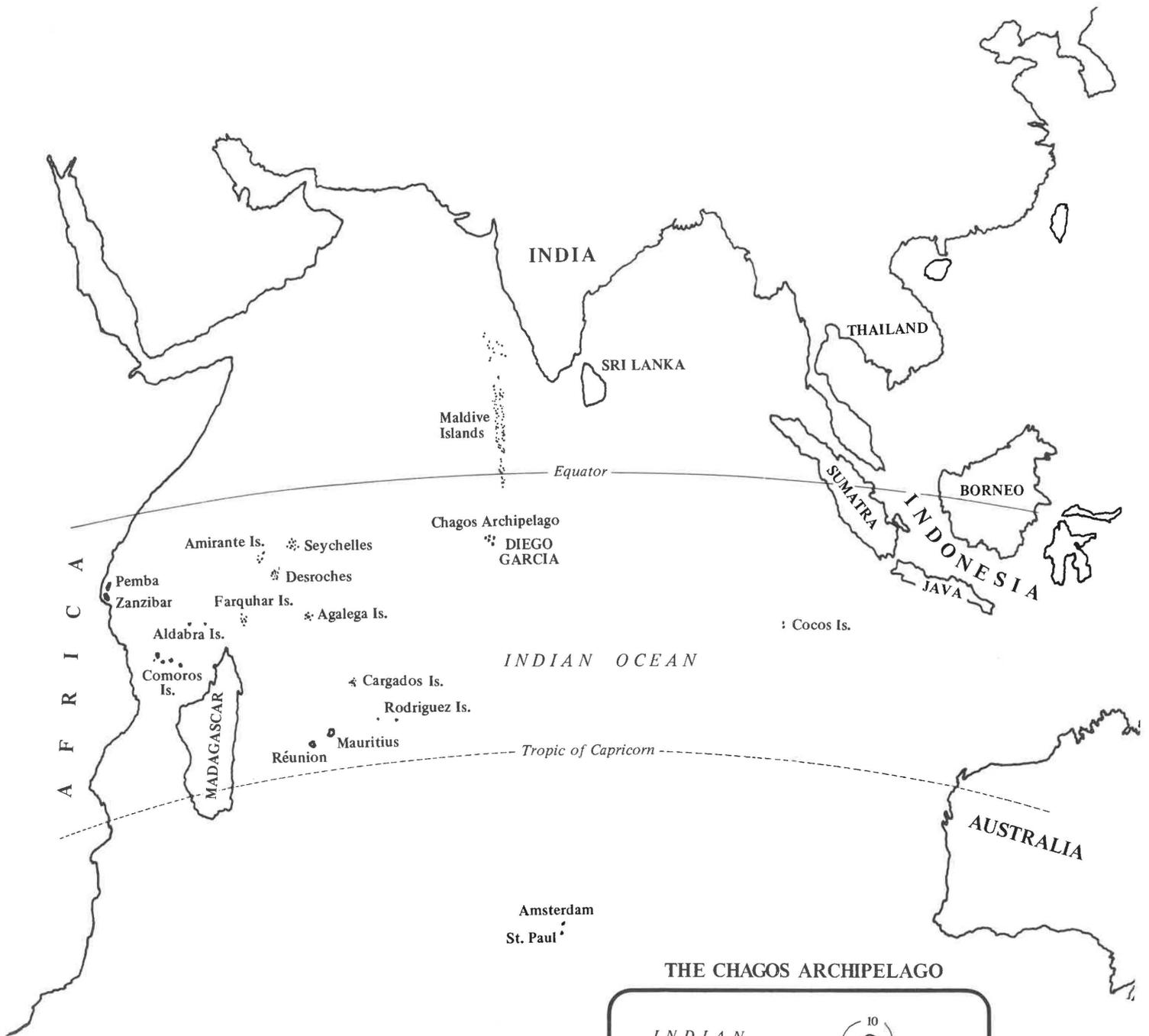
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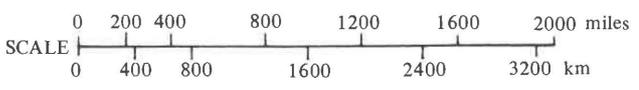
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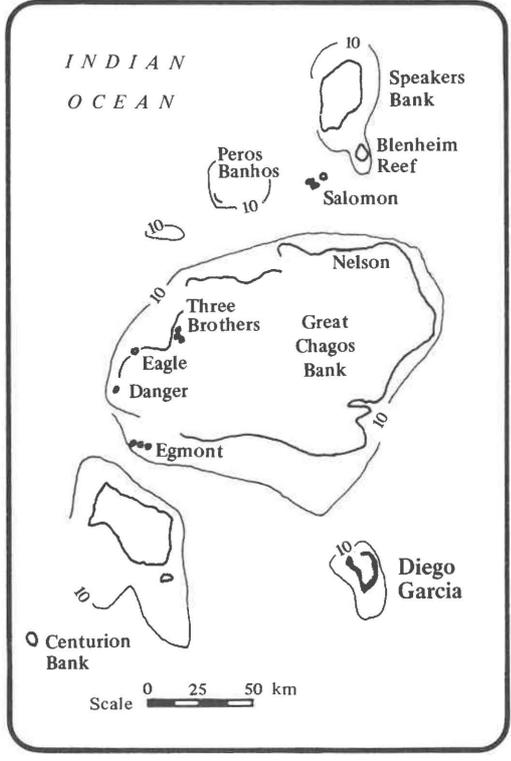
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Crozet Is.<sup>1,2</sup> Kerguelen



**THE CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO**



Aldabra, Farquhar & Desroches were formally ceded to the Seychelles in 1976.

Note: Islands included in BIOT: Chagos Archipelago (formerly under British colonial governor in Mauritius); Desroches Archipelago, Farquhar, and Aldebra (formerly under British colonial governor in Seychelles).

## INTRODUCTION

*London 1965*: a decade of unparalleled activity by Britain regarding the countries of its once vast empire was drawing to a close. Several million people had been 'given' independence; indigenous leaders were being released from jail; the association of Commonwealth countries was gathering numbers and strength; the final traces of colonialism were disappearing fast.

Or were they? In April 1965, the Colonial Secretary, Anthony Greenwood, travelled to Mauritius which was then still a British colony.<sup>1</sup> Greenwood spelled out his government's terms for granting independence to this Indian Ocean island. Despite UN resolution 1514 (about the inalienable right of colonial people to independence) the British government offered independence with strings. Mauritius could have independence on condition that it hived off a group of its small islands, the Chagos Archipelago, 1,200 miles to the north-east in the Indian Ocean. As an inducement, the British government was prepared to give Mauritius £3 million in compensation for the loss of these outlying islands. As the debate continued, the UN General Assembly in December 1965 passed Resolution 2066 XX – which the United Kingdom government did not accept – inviting Britain 'to take no action which would dismember the Territory of Mauritius and to violate its territorial integrity'. Local Mauritian politicians were divided over the British offer. Gaeten Duval, leader of the Mauritius Social Democratic Party, suggested a referendum; Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam urged acceptance. Ramgoolam won the argument; Mauritius received independence (in 1968), whilst Britain kept the Chagos islands, the largest of which was a U-shaped atoll called Diego Garcia, measuring some 14 miles by 4 miles. Britain's equivocal offer of 'independence with strings' was to trigger off tragedy for the Chagos inhabitants, and turn some 1800 peaceful people into a sad group of involuntary exiles.

Thus in the twilight of its colonial phase, Britain proceeded to create a brand new colony. It arbitrarily demarcated the Chagos islands in with the nearby islands of Desroches, Farquhar and Aldabra<sup>2</sup> and formed the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). What was its motive? The answer became clear the following year. In December 1966, Britain signed a defence deal with the United States,<sup>3</sup> which leased the BIOT to them for defence purposes for 50 years with the option of a further 20 years. The deal, signed by Lord Chalfont, on behalf of the then Foreign Secretary, George Brown, was not debated in Parliament and attracted virtually no publicity.

What followed in the years following the Anglo-American deal is one of the the more extraordinary episodes of recent history, besides being a cruel treatment of a minority. The reason for the deal was that the US Pentagon had selected Diego Garcia as being an ideal place from which to monitor the activities of the Soviet Navy.<sup>4</sup> In 1972 a further agreement was signed between US and British governments to establish a communications facility on Diego Garcia; another agreement in 1974 provided for a support facility; whilst in 1976 an 'exchange of notes' took place to allow for extending the runway (an 8,000 foot runway had by then already been constructed) and other expansion. Thus Diego Garcia was gradually turned into a military base.

For the British government the 1966 defence deal brought with it a snag. In keeping the Chagos islands, Britain also kept their population. That population consisted of about 2000 Ilois<sup>5</sup> people who earned their living by harvesting coconuts and by fishing; they also grew their own vegetables and reared poultry. The Pentagon made it clear that it did not want people living on an island which might be turned into a key base.

So the basic right of a community to live in peace in the land of their birth was ignored. Having connived in the 1966 deal, well aware of what it would mean for a small island community, Britain then had the task of moving the Ilois – its own British subjects. Britain followed up the deal with a series of measures which it is difficult to imagine any 'civilised' country could use. Between 1965 and 1973 the British government went about the systematic removal of its own subjects from Diego Garcia; it deposited them in exile in Mauritius without any workable resettlement scheme; left them in abject poverty, gave them a tiny amount of compensation and later offered more on condition that the islanders renounced their rights ever to return home. Britain's Foreign Office misrepresented the

Ilois people to the outside world, showing a disturbing insensitivity about their fate, even appearing not to know how many there were of them. During this time Britain clearly violated Article 9 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states 'no one should be subjected to arbitrary ... exile', and also Article 13, 'everybody has the right to return to his country'.

'This act of mass kidnapping'<sup>6</sup> was carried on in almost total secrecy, with Britain's unopen system of government claiming another victim. The system meant that no one discovered what was going on until 1975. A US Congressional Committee was then told, 'the entire subject of Diego Garcia was considered classified ... in response to British sensitivities about the discussion'.<sup>7</sup> The British government did not want to be seen creating its own refugees: it appeared to be so ashamed of its actions that it wished to keep them secret. Neither however do the governments of the United States or Mauritius emerge from the sordid episode with much credit. The US government's desire to have Diego Garcia as a base caused the Ilois people to be exiled; the US washed its hands of the matter and left compensation to Britain. The Mauritian government sat for years on the compensation money that it had received from Britain for the Ilois, despite the poverty in which the exiles were living.

Britain's treatment of the Ilois people stands in eloquent and stark contrast with the way the people of the Falkland islands were treated in the Spring of 1982. The invasion of the Falklands was furiously resisted by British forces travelling 8,000 miles at a cost of over a thousand million pounds and many British and Argentinian lives. Diego Garcia was handed over without its inhabitants – far from being defended – even being consulted before being removed.

Whereas the wishes of fewer than 2000 Falkland islanders were so important to the British government that those islanders virtually determined British foreign policy in the South Atlantic, the wishes of the Ilois have never counted. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the chief reason for the 'paramount' treatment offered to the Falkland islanders is simply that their skins are white. The Ilois, some of them descendants of African slaves and sufferers from leprosy, were never so lucky. In the whole tragic story of the Ilois people, the suspicion of racism is never far away.

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## Chapter 1

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### Ilois History

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The peopling of the Chagos islands dates back to 1776, when a Frenchman living in Mauritius, Vicomte de Souillac, sent a ship to Diego Garcia, on hearing that English people were attempting to settle there. On failing to meet any English, the seamen sent by de Souillac, 'put up a stone showing that the islands had been captured by French people'.<sup>8</sup> Françoise Botte records that under a 'Concessionnaires Act' two early settlers, M.N. Lenorman and M. Dauguet, established a fishing company in 1776 and were allowed to 'enjoy the facilities of the islands'. In return they had to accept all the sufferers from leprosy from 'Isle de France' as Mauritius was then known. So the Chagos islands became a leper colony. From 1776 onwards the island's coconuts, which grew wild, were carried to Isle de France and were processed into oil. (Thus Chagos became known as the Oil Islands.) Seabirds, salted fish, wood and tortoise were also exported from Diego, not only to Isle de France, but also to other Indian Ocean islands, including Madagascar. Later some found their way to Europe. An indication of the natural beauty of Diego Garcia is seen in the view expressed by an Englishman, James Horsburgh, who was shipwrecked on the island in 1786. He described it as 'one of the wonderful phenomena of the globe'. By the end of the 18th century, the leper colony numbered around 300. 'The importance of Chagos in these days', says Botte 'is seen from the fact that between 1773 and 1810, there were 81 journeys from Mauritius to Chagos and back ... Rodrigues during that same period had only 30 visits from Mauritius.'<sup>9</sup>

With the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Chagos islands (and also Mauritius) passed from French to British colonial rule and the Chagos people became, and have remained to this day, British citizens.<sup>10</sup> Twenty four years after the British take over, a Mauritian judge abolished the sending of leprosy sufferers to the Chagos islands. The population of Diego Garcia continued to grow; Peros Banhos and Salomon, the other islands that make up the Chagos,

<sup>1</sup>For footnotes see page 12

were also peopled. In addition to migrants from Africa, people came too from India. By the year 1900 Diego Garcia 'boasted three flourishing copra factories, a less successful coaling station for ships on the Australian run, a church, a hospital, a jail, a light railway, some handsome French colonial style houses and more than 500 inhabitants'.<sup>11</sup>

In the Chagos as a whole, Botte records that by the beginning of the twentieth century there was a 'floating population of about 426 families, of which 60% were of African and Malagasy origin and 40% were of Indian origin, especially "Tamil"'. She adds that there were about 60 children for every 100 adults.<sup>12</sup> More than three quarters of the islanders considered themselves permanent settlers. The copra company provided living quarters, but the residents – the Ilois people as they had become known – generally preferred to build their own thatched cottages, usually consisting of 3 rooms and a verandah. The men who harvested coconuts received a small monetary wage but this was kept in a bank account and, when large enough, enabled the worker to travel to Mauritius to buy 'many things such as beds, new kitchen utensils, the newly fashioned sewing materials etc'.<sup>13</sup> But the chief payment was barter; each Ilois male worker received 10½ lbs. of rice a week, a bottle of oil and some milk. Copra workers also fished in their off-duty hours, with lobster being a frequent catch. Most Ilois families had small kitchen gardens in which they cultivated pumpkin, tomatoes, chillis and aubergines; they also reared chickens and ducks for their own consumption.

As the Ilois developed their identity and culture they became, through accident of history, a pronounced matriarchal society. (In their struggle for justice during the 1970's it was Ilois women who were dominant.) One of the chief reasons for this was that male leprosy sufferers were more vulnerable to early death than females; as a result there was a larger female population on the islands. Also, only about one in three couples who lived together were married. Free unions gave rise to fragmented families 'where the mother had a predominant role because it happened that the mother's partner vanished or that she decided to have another one'.<sup>14</sup> Even within marriage there was a social convention that when a husband went fishing at night, there was someone else who 'came for sex affairs with his wife'.<sup>15</sup> Whether married or not, it was the Ilois women who generally brought up and had the major say over the children. The mothers of wives usually lived with families and also helped to bring up any children.

On the other Chagos islands, Peros Banhos and Salomon, inhabitants followed a similar way of life to the Ilois of Diego Garcia. There was some movement of people between the islands, although distance precluded frequent contact – both are over 100 miles from Diego. The main religion on the islands was Roman Catholic, but there were two other cults, one was the 'Tamoule' ritual and the other was from Madagascar. By the outbreak of the First World War, the Ilois had developed a distinct culture and identity and even a specific variation of the Creole language, which few outsiders could understand. Life on the Chagos islands would at times have been hard but it was settled. The attempt by the British government in the 1970's to try to portray the Ilois as 'Mauritius and Seychelles contract labourers'<sup>16</sup> was totally misleading and either ignorant or deceitful. It implied that the Ilois were not permanent residents in their homeland, whereas Botte records that as early as 1900, 'the majority of population was native'.<sup>17</sup> The British government seemed unaware that its 1970's portrayal of the Ilois people was contradicted by its 1950's portrayal. In the 1950's the Colonial Office shot a film of the Chagos islands which not only extolled their beauty but also spoke of them as being inhabited, 'mostly by men and women born and brought up in the islands'. Further proof about the settled nature of the Ilois community came from pictures taken by a US Serviceman in 1975. He photographed the cemetery at Diego Garcia on which the engraved names of generations of Ilois could be seen.<sup>18</sup>

During the 20th century until 1965, the lifestyle of the Ilois changed little. A small hospital and school were established, and the population grew to around 1,800 (coincidentally almost identical with that of the Falkland islands). Few Western people visited the Chagos, but those who did were impressed by the beauty. One traveller, Robert Scott, said that the settlement had the 'look of a French coastal village, miraculously transformed whole'. Scott, who visited the islands in the 1950's added that 'roots have been struck and a society particularly suited to the islands developed'.<sup>19</sup> Journalist James Cameron who visited the Chagos at about the

same time called it 'a beauty spot of unrivalled tranquillity and beauty'.<sup>20</sup> As the British Colonial Office film said in the 1950's the people of the islands 'lived their lives in surroundings of wonderful natural beauty and in conditions most tranquil and benign'.<sup>21</sup> In the early 1960's this settled community was enjoying a period of prosperity; the copra industry was thriving as never before. In addition to copra products, the Ilois were also exporting quantities of guano, used for phosphate; the community was established, the future looked bright. With an ideal tropical climate there was talk of developing a tourist industry. But the peace of the islands, the conditions most tranquil and benign, was suddenly about to change.

The eyes of the British government had turned from the BIOT island of Aldabra, which was considered as a site for an Indian Ocean base, to Diego Garcia. 'The Americans were not allowed to develop on Aldabra' points out Robin Cook MP, 'because it would mean disturbing giant tortoises. Instead they went to Diego Garcia'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the British government seemed to invite the accusation that it preferred to place the welfare of giant tortoises above that of the Ilois people.

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## Chapter 2

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### The End of a Way of Life

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It had long been the custom of the Ilois to go to Mauritius to visit relatives, to spend holidays or their money, buying radios and other consumer goods, or obtaining medical supplies and treatment that were unavailable on Chagos. 'It was quite an event for a family to come to Mauritius' said the Sylva Report.<sup>23</sup> Ilois were happy when they returned to their islands with their bags full of colourful clothes, fruits, vegetables, toys etc.

In 1965 the tragedy of the Ilois began. Britain was already negotiating with the US about the Chagos islands; in the minds of military planners, islanders and a base would not mix: the Ilois had to go. The way the British government went about that task – a Labour government with its fine talk of human rights – has few parallels in the mistreatment of a minority group. After 1965, when Ilois families were ready to sail home, after their stay in Mauritius, *they were not allowed back*. They were told that no ships were available to take them back, and were often left stranded at the quayside, turned exiles at a stroke. Many Ilois people testified to having been offered a visit to Mauritius, of having been tricked into leaving Diego Garcia by being offered a free trip.<sup>24</sup> Forty-one year old Christian Ramdas, who was born on the Chagos island as were his parents, grandmother and most of his children, was one person who went on vacation to Mauritius in 1965 and was not allowed to return.<sup>25</sup> Between 1965 and 1971 Britain was deliberately creating exiles, turning its own citizens into refugees. The tragedy was that no one appeared to spot what was happening. The Ilois, stranded in Mauritius, squatted down as best they could in the slums of Port Louis. But with little or no money, some starved. Their existence went largely unnoticed or unreported by the local press. Sometimes whole families were split up. Diego Garcia had no modern news agency to report the missing persons. So Britain quietly kidnapped its own people, and few heard about what it was doing until the mid-70's.

The British government stepped up the pressure in other ways. In 1967 the BIOT bought out the sole employer of labour on the Chagos islands, Chagos Agalega, for a sum said by the Foreign Office to be 'over £1 million'.<sup>26</sup> A shareholder, Mr. Marcel Moulinie, entrusted with the management of Britain's new property, told journalists 8 years later: 'We were not told when we took over that we should run the plantations down'.<sup>27</sup> This however is what happened. The BIOT closed down the copra activities on Chagos during the period from 1968 to 1973, and a mass evacuation was planned. 'It wasn't very pleasant telling them they had to go' said Moulinie, 'it was a paradise there. We told them we had orders from BIOT. We just said, sorry fellows, but on such and such a day we are closing up. They didn't object but they were very unhappy about it and I can understand this because I'm talking about 5 generations of Ilois who were born there'.<sup>28</sup>

The Foreign Office was later to claim that in the removal of the islanders, 'all went willingly and no coercion was used'.<sup>29</sup> The

Chairman of the 1975 Congressional hearings<sup>30</sup>, Lee H. Hamilton, exclaimed, when being told by a witness that no coercion was used in the removal of the Ilois, 'No coercion was used when you cut off their jobs? What other kind of coercion do you need? Are you talking about putting them on the rack?'

Britain was putting the Ilois on the rack. In addition to cutting off their ships in Mauritius, cutting off their jobs on the Chagos islands, the British government also decided to cut off the Ilois food imports. The Chagos islands were in a similar position on food imports as Britain. They could survive on the food grown and fished locally, as Britain did in the Second World War, but in normal times, imports could be afforded and were a valued part of their diet. It seems that from 1968 onwards the food ships did not sail to the Chagos islands.

The drain of people away from the islands continued. According to Botte, some 251 Ilois families left the Chagos islands between 1965 and 1970.<sup>31</sup> This would probably be about 900 to 1,000 people. This evacuation of a sizable percentage of the Ilois people, before 1971, enabled a Foreign Office spokesman to claim, 'in 1971 there were about 830 people of all ages in the Archipelago'.<sup>32</sup> The British government has rarely admitted to the numbers it forced off the Chagos islands between 1965 and 1970. It would seem that in 1965, before the exiling began, the population of the three Chagos islands was, as near as can be estimated, about 1,800 people.

In March 1971 the first American servicemen arrived on Diego Garcia. The Ilois were told that they did not have the 'right to stay'. Coercion was subtle but threatening. One Ilois said they left because they believed rumours that they would be shot if they stayed. Other Ilois said they heard that the Americans were going to explode gas bombs on the island.<sup>33</sup> If the Ilois left their homeland willingly it was because they felt they had no choice.

September 1971 witnessed the final movement of the Ilois from Diego Garcia. The tragic story of the last people to leave Diego was related by the Ilois themselves; '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 there. So were our fathers and forefathers who were buried in that land'.<sup>34</sup> The islanders were given little time to pack their possessions, usually less than two weeks. To some of the older Ilois the shock of being told they must go was too much. One Ilois woman, Marie Louina, died on Diego when she learned she would have to leave her homeland.

The Ilois on Diego Garcia were moved first to Peros Banhos and Salomon. Some 800 people then lived on these two small islands for two years. Further injustice was done to the Ilois by the refusal to let them stay on these smaller islands, both of which are over 100 miles from Diego, and which are not required for military purposes. The Pentagon is thought to have insisted on a clean sweep of the area, and again the Ilois felt they had no choice but to leave. But as part of the Ilois community could have lived on Peros Banhos and Salomon, and were not allowed to do so because of US Military dictates, the question of compensation from the United States, rather than just from Britain, is relevant. In 1973 the British government decided it was time to complete the final evacuation of the Ilois from the smaller Chagos islands. The BIOT arranged for its own ship, the *Nordvaer*, to take the Ilois to Mauritius. So a way of life was tragically brought to an end.

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## Chapter 3

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### 1973 The Final Removal

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The good ship *Nordvaer* was a sound enough vessel for transporting copra and other exports from the Chagos islands and taking imports of food back to them. As a ship for carrying passengers 2,500 miles across the Indian Ocean, it was hopelessly inadequate. (Ships went first to the Seychelles, due west of the Chagos, before heading south for Mauritius. This doubled the mileage.) Limited sleeping accommodation was available on board, and neither did the ship have very much room. The Ilois were forced to leave behind their furniture, which had been bought with hard-earned money on the plantations. All they were able to take with them was a minimum of personal possessions, packed into a small crate. Throughout 1973, the *Nordvaer* made a number of crossings, with as many Ilois crammed into the ship as possible.

So the last remaining Ilois left their homeland for exile in Mauritius. Before they left home they were apparently promised that there would be money and jobs for them in Mauritius. That at least was some compensation, they thought, as they crammed down on the open decks of the ship with the last of the copra exports rolling about them. Most of the Ilois were deeply grieved over what was happening. On one sailing, a 28 year old Ilois, Christian Simon committed suicide through despair.<sup>35</sup> One eye witness, who saw the Ilois arrive in the Seychelles, said 'they looked just like refugees'.<sup>36</sup>

On arrival in Mauritius their nightmare went on. The British government did not even have the courtesy to arrange for its own subjects to be met. The Ilois walked bewildered off their ships and tramped through the slums of the capital Port Louis to try to find a relative or friend who would offer accommodation. But when the *Nordvaer* arrived with its final group of Ilois refugees, there was an unexpected development. For probably the first time in their history, the peaceful Ilois, on that last sailing, staged a demonstration. Word had reached them about what had happened to their fellow countrymen who had embarked on earlier sailings. The final Ilois group staged a sit-in on the deck of the *Nordvaer* and said they would only disembark if they were given houses.

This unexpected display of militancy paid off. Some were given 'council' housing, others were accommodated in dockers' flats. They were even given a small amount of money. Jobs however were harder to come by. The Ilois had landed in an island with substantial unemployment of its own. When a cyclone destroyed much of Port Louis's slum housing, at the beginning of 1975, many of the Ilois were left without either a home or a job.

A small amount of compensation for the exiles was in theory available from 1973<sup>37</sup> but the islanders were not to receive it until 1978. In 1973 the British government agreed to pay £650,000 to the Mauritian government for the relief and resettlement of the islanders.<sup>38</sup> Nothing was paid to compensate them for being turned out of their island homeland. The British government said in 1976 that the money offered, 'represented a full and final discharge of HMG's obligations'.<sup>39</sup> This was to be the first of a series of 'full and final' offers. The compensation was not only inadequate; it was offered too late to offset the hardships of the Ilois. Slowness on the part of the Mauritian government added to the exiles' problems. In mid-1975, most of the Ilois were living in gross poverty; many were housed in shacks, most of them lacked enough food, compensation had not been paid to them; at least 1 in 40 had died of starvation and disease. Ilois with jobs and housing were sharing the little they had with fellow Ilois who were not so fortunate. In this way many people kept alive.

At about the same time the British government was assuring the Falkland islanders, British subjects in an adjacent ocean, that nothing would be done behind their backs and that they would be fully consulted at every stage. The reason for the double standard, the government has never explained.

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### The Truth Emerges

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On 5 June 1975 the United States Congress began a process which blew the facts about the treatment of the Ilois wide open. Hearings began to 'examine the reasons behind the decision of the United States to try to develop base support facilities on the island of Diego Garcia'.<sup>40</sup> The US Senate had earlier shown a distinct uneasiness about Diego Garcia as a military base. Fear of the arms build-up in the Indian Ocean, and the risk of confrontation with the Soviet Union, caused the Senate to veto funds for the island's expansion in December 1974.

The Senate's uneasiness was clear at the first hearing in June 1975. The Congressional Committee began by examining why the expansion of Diego Garcia was in the national interest, as had been claimed by President Ford. Mr. George S. Vest, Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, of the US Department of State, pointed to the growth of the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean. 'We firmly believe', he said, 'that an effective capability to deploy and support US Naval Forces in the Indian Ocean helps to deter attempts to disrupt the vital sea lines of communication which traverse it'.<sup>41</sup> He went on to speak of the deterrence credibility that US Forces had in the region. Mr. James H. Noyes, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence (International Security Affairs) for Near Eastern, African and South Asian Affairs, told the Committee that the US proposals for Diego Garcia involved lengthening the

island's runway from 8,000 to 12,000 feet, dredging the harbour, building extra accommodation for military personnel, and generally expanding facilities. Total cost of the expansion was estimated by the US Navy to be \$175 million.<sup>42</sup> During questioning Mr. Vest was asked, 'are there no inhabitants in Diego Garcia?'. No inhabitants, he replied, truthfully. By that time they were in despair in the slums of Mauritius.

The Committee adjourned its deliberations until November that year, but in the meantime the facts emerged. On 28 July, the Senate had approved funds for Diego Garcia's expansion by 53 votes to 43, and gave the Pentagon the power they wished. Towards the end of July, Britain's Defence Secretary Roy Mason told the House of Commons that the Americans were proposing not a base, but a very austere communications facility for aircraft and ships, smaller than the RAF staging post at Gan in Addu Atoll (see later).<sup>43</sup>

The truth about the Ilois was finally revealed in September 1975. The *Washington Post* journalist, David B. Ottaway, cabled a story from Port Louis which revealed the stark human fact that more than a thousand of the Ilois were forcibly removed before 1972 to make way for the building of the base; and he reported that 'the islanders are now living in abject poverty here in Mauritius'.<sup>44</sup> Ottaway revealed that in early 1975 the Ilois had drawn up a petition and presented it to the British High Commission with copies to the American Embassy, the Mauritian Prime Minister and several Opposition Leaders. The petition, said Ottaway, was primarily a plea for help but, 'it also expresses the Diego Garcians' feelings about being summarily tossed off their island to make way for a military base'. The petition said, 'we the inhabitants of the Chagos islands – Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon – have been uprooted from these islands because the Mauritius government sold the islands to the British government to build a base. Our ancestors were slaves on those islands but we know that we are the heirs of those islands. Although we were poor there we were not dying of hunger. We were living free ... here in Mauritius ... we, being mini-slaves, don't get anybody to help us. We are at a loss not knowing what to do'. The petition ends with an appeal to Britain to get the Mauritian government to provide them with plots of land, a house for each family and jobs; it says that if these facilities are not forthcoming, 'it is preferable that we be sent back to our islands'.

The petition was a powerful human plea for help but Britain merely passed on the responsibility. Ottaway reports that the British apparently told the islanders to address their petition to the Mauritian government. The British government, presumably having washed its hands of the Ilois in its 'full and final discharge', was not interested in the exiles it created. Just over a week later the *Sunday Times* carried a three-page exposé of the affair. In addition to telling of the plight of the Ilois, the article published a previously hidden deal in which the United States had given Britain an \$11.5 million discount on Polaris submarines (by way of waiving research and development costs) to help it establish the BIOT – which made the Diego Garcian base possible. The Ilois, said the exposé, were 'the islanders that Britain sold'.<sup>45</sup>

When the US Congress resumed its hearings on Diego Garcia in November that year, Senator John Culver (Ohio) complained that no witness in previous hearings had 'mentioned there had been inhabitants living on the island, some for generations'.<sup>46</sup> Culver went on to say, 'simply put, these people were evicted from their homes only when and because the United States wanted to build a military base. We add nothing to our moral stature as a nation by trying to sidestep all responsibility for these people'. Senators were clearly unhappy about why the United States were not offering the Ilois compensation. In questions to Mr. George T. Churchill, Director of the Office of International Security Operations at the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Senator Larry Winn, Jr, of Kansas, said, 'I just have the feeling all the way through this hearing that the American negotiators and the people involved have said "this is all a British problem and let the people sink or swim and just let the British worry about". I don't know where any human concern shows up on your part or in your report or anything else. I can't understand why we are so damned interested in this thing as a military base that we don't have some type of input or ask questions or check on the human beings that are living on this island before we kick them off at our request through the British'.<sup>47</sup>

The Mauritian government meanwhile was still having difficulty on agreeing how the compensation that was urgently needed, should be distributed. Following a meeting between the Mauritian Prime Minister and David Ennals, Minister of State at the Foreign Office, it was agreed that a British official should visit the island to agree on a suitable resettlement scheme. Without compensation the Ilois were desperately trying to survive in circumstances that were distinctly hostile. Some of the men had obtained jobs as dockers, some of the women as maids. Other women, including girls as young as thirteen years of age, turned to prostitution; youths were driven to petty theft. The transition from the barter economy of the Chagos to the monetary economy of Mauritius imposed considerable strains. Many Ilois found it difficult to use Mauritian money and the latest arrivals were often cheated by Mauritians – and even by Ilois who arrived in the nineteen sixties. Botte records an example of some of the Ilois who came to Mauritius before 1975 arranging with merchants in Port Louis for their Ilois compatriots to work as loaders. But wages were not paid directly to the loaders but given to the Ilois intermediaries – who kept most of the cash themselves and gave the loaders only small coins. 'The poor loaders could not have any real idea of its value', says Botte, 'when they went shopping, they were surprised that they could not buy much with it'.<sup>48</sup>

At the end of 1975 at least half the islanders were unemployed and most were either sharing a house or sleeping rough. Some of the poorest were being cared for by the Sisters of Mother Theresa. Commenting on the plight of the Ilois, one of the nuns said: 'They are poorer than the poor of Mauritius. They don't have enough food and some of their children are undernourished. They need some more medicine and they lack especially clothing'.<sup>49</sup> Two other local organisations, the Institute for Development and Progress and the Church World Service also helped – the latter by paying the bus fares of Ilois children. The Mauritian government also helped to relieve some of the worst distress, paying small amounts of public assistance to 74 families, family allowances to 70, and old age pensions to 57 Ilois. But the assistance was small and only marginally relieved the Ilois' plight. A survey by the Comité Ilois Organisation Fraternelle, gives grim individual details of the despair of the Ilois. The survey documents:

*Eliane and Michele Mouza*: mother and child committed suicide.

*Leone Rangasamy*: born in Peros, drowned herself because she was prevented from going back.

*Tarenne Chiatoux*: committed suicide, no job, no roof.

*Volfrin family*: *Daisy Volfrin*: no food for three days, obtained Rs 3 (about 20p) and no more as Public Assistance. Died through poverty.

*Josue and Maude Baptiste*: poverty – no roof, no food, committed suicide.

The document lists 9 cases of suicide and 26 families that had died together in poverty. It tells of a significant number of cases where Ilois died after 1 to 12 months stay in Mauritius. 'The causes mostly are: unhappiness, non-adaption of Ilois within the social framework of Mauritius, extreme poverty, particularly lack of food, house, jobs. It says the main cause of the sufferings of the Ilois was the lack of a proper plan to welcome them in Mauritius. 'There was no rehabilitation programme for them.' It also speaks of the large number of women and young girls – 'some of them aged only 13, 14 and 15' who have left their husbands or their parents to lead a prostitute's life in order to earn a living.<sup>50</sup>

This was the suffering that the British government had inflicted on a minority, not during the days of conquering an Empire, but in the middle of the nineteen-seventies. The government, having washed its hands of the matter, disclaimed all knowledge about deaths of Ilois. A Foreign Office official says in a letter dated 16 August 1976: 'Although we have no information, some deaths are no doubt bound to have occurred among the islanders in the normal course of events'.<sup>51</sup>

One of the Ilois, Michel Vencatessen, decided to fight back against the British actions. Vencatessen had papers to prove he was born on the Chagos islands and also his father and grandfather. With the help of solicitors in Mauritius, Vencatessen announced his decision to sue the British government for wrongful dismissal from the Chagos on the grounds that he was 'ordered, coerced and compelled' to leave the islands. The British government hoped to head off the Vencatessen action by sending in an advisor, Mr. A.R.G. Prosser, to advise on a resettlement scheme, and by enabling the compensation to be distributed, to arrange for the whole embarrassing episode to be forgotten – as far as Britain was concerned.

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## Chapter 4

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### An Advisor drops in

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The man who was to end the embarrassment, Mr. A.R.G. Prosser, dropped into Mauritius on Sunday 25 January 1976<sup>52</sup>, spent a week on the island, and then flew back home. He made a number of – inevitably secret – recommendations and his report contained a few surprises. Whereas only a year before his visit, 422 families had signed a petition clearly indicating their plight and their wish to return home, unless they had the means to get houses and jobs, Mr. Prosser's report said, 'the majority of Ilois are reasonably well settled in Mauritius'.<sup>53</sup> Some 30 to 40 families were said in the report to want to return home. Three years later a major report on the Ilois found that 77% of Ilois adults wanted to go back home. The Prosser report continues to stand alone in its findings of 'reasonably well settled' Ilois. The question inevitably arises as to whether the British government really gave their advisor time enough to find out the whole truth. Certainly the report's findings conflict with every piece of evidence, either before or since, about the Ilois's wishes.

Mr. Prosser's report did however contain a number of constructive proposals for spending the compensation money. It suggested setting up a resettlement committee, grouping government and Ilois representatives, training unemployed Ilois into semi-skilled labour; a proper survey into the condition of Ilois living conditions and the construction of suitable houses for the Ilois people.<sup>54</sup>

But by early 1977 the Ilois were so hard pressed that they wanted not a scheme, but money. They insisted that the compensation money be shared out among them; the Mauritius government agreed and the British High Commission was informed accordingly. It was not until 1978 however that the money was distributed. Each adult was given compensation of 7,590 rupees (about £650) and children between 356 and 410 rupees depending on age. The money was at last distributed in April 1978 – but it turned out to be hopelessly inadequate. Inflation had seriously eroded the value of the already meagre compensation. The Prosser Report pointed out (in 1976) 'from the time of the signing of the agreement between the Mauritius government and the British government (in 1973) the cost of housing in Mauritius has risen approximately 500%'.<sup>55</sup> The experience of Raphael Louis, one of the last people to leave Diego Garcia, seems fairly typical. Mr. Louis received 19,800 rupees (about £1,600) under the compensation scheme for himself and wife and family. He found a plot of land that was just suited for his needs. But there was a snag – the price was 27,000 rupees, and that was before he started building. Mr. Louis went back to live in slum quarters.<sup>56</sup>

Raphael Louis was lucky in that he did receive something. There were a small number of tragic cases where the Ilois were unable to produce any documents and were subsequently turned away with nothing. In July 1978 several families, still unable to find anywhere to live, held a protest in the public gardens of the capital. They were moved on by the police and over the next few months were sent from place to place by the housing authorities. The Mauritian government sent workmen to break down some of their shacks of hardboard and corrugated iron. The Ilois were becoming aware that they had been deceived and they decided to intensify their struggle. Again they put up tents in public gardens and stayed for 10 days to protest about the government's indifference. Then in September, a group of Ilois women went on hunger strike for 21 days. At Christmas, 4 Ilois were put in prison and fined for resisting the authorities pulling down their shacks.

The Mauritius government came under pressure to ask Britain for increased compensation, especially as it had become clear that there were more than the 434 families that Britain originally claimed. The figure of 434 families appeared to be the number of people who suffered in the mass evacuation of the Chagos from 1971 to 1973; it seemed to take no account of those removed from 1965 to 1971. A further charge against the British government is that it did not carry out an accurate census of its own population. The Sylva Survey, carried out in 1981, put the number of Ilois families far higher than the British government figures. Sylva said that the total number of Ilois families was 942, and that the Ilois population in Mauritius then numbered 2,867.<sup>57</sup>

Despite their public demonstrations, support for the Ilois or even awareness of their problems among the Mauritian public remained

low. At times the exiles were subject to open hostility and this caused them to disperse from the slums of Port Louis and move to other locations around the island. But, dispersed around Mauritius as they were, the summer of 1979 proved to be the time when the Ilois became better organised to protect their rights.

Although the Ilois had set up a committee in the early nineteen seventies, it lacked local support or participation and was generally weak. In 1979 the chief opposition party, Mouvement Militant Mauricien, and a group affiliated to it (Organisation Fraternelle) helped to organise the Ilois on a regional basis. A joint committee was formed, consisting of Ilois people and Mauritius sympathisers, called the 'Comité de Soutien Ilois'. Support for the Ilois gradually grew. The MMM (in government from June 1982) gradually became more involved in the Ilois's fate. They held that the separation of Diego Garcia from Mauritius in 1965 was illegal and, should they gain power, pledged themselves to press for the return of the Chagos islands.

Support for the Ilois was also growing in Britain. In 1975 an English teacher and Methodist lay-reader in Kent, George Champion, set up a support group for the Ilois, the 1966 Society for Diego Garcians in Exile. Incensed by Britain's treatment of a powerless minority group, Champion (who assumed the name 'Chagos' to identify himself with the Ilois cause) felt that if support among the British public was mobilised then the government would not be allowed to get away with its treatment of the Ilois. The chief aim of the 1966 Society was to help the Ilois get back to their islands, but it also continued to press for fair compensation to be paid for them during their enforced exile in Mauritius. Following the *Sunday Times* disclosures in September 1975 about the Ilois, the Foreign Office escaped lightly when a debate on the issue failed to take off in the British press. Champion picked up the pieces and launched a dedicated campaign to explain the Ilois case to the British public and to the government. Making contact with Members of Parliament, US Senators, the Ilois and their sympathisers in Mauritius, Champion built up a solid network of contacts. Once a month he mounted a vigil outside the Foreign Office, bearing a placard with the words 'Diego Garcia'. People often asked Champion, 'who is Diego Garcia?'. 'Once they knew, they supported the cause.'<sup>58</sup> He also briefed journalists and, with an increasing flow of information coming from Mauritius, kept up a constant barrage of letters to the Foreign Office which often punched large holes in their argument, especially about the status of the Ilois before 1965. Through Champion's exposé of the Ilois case, the Methodist Church in Britain also took up the Ilois cause; the Methodist Church Fund for Human Need began to make financial donations to the Ilois and have continued to give them support.

Champion's work succeeded in pricking the conscience of both the British and Mauritian public. An article in *Le Mauricien* in 1978 quoted Champion as saying, 'we (the British) are responsible for this crime and we must do everything possible to compensate our victims and prepare for the return to the islands of those who in spite of their long exile will wish to return'. The paper went on to ask, 'what have we to say who sold Diego Garcia and set going the fateful chain of events?'<sup>59</sup>

Champion's patient work slowly paid off. In the autumn of 1979 the British government appeared to realise that it had to shift its position and recognise that its original 'full and final offer' was anything but full and was considered by the Ilois to be anything but final. But in fact what followed, was one of the least creditable twists in the betrayal of the Ilois people.

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## Chapter 5

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### 'Never To Return?'

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'This is the deed of me ... and the adult members of my family ... I am an Ilois who left that part of the BIOT never to return ... we accept the money already paid and to be paid and we abandon all our claims and rights (if any) of whatever nature to return to the BIOT.'<sup>60</sup>

There can be few if any instances in modern history of a powerful nation making its own subjects refugees, by easing them off their homeland for military purposes, failing to give them proper compensation and then, years later, saying that it will increase that

compensation on condition that the refugees abandon all claims and rights ever to return home. This however is what the British government attempted to do to the Ilois in late 1979. The well-known London solicitor Mr. Bernard Sheridan, who was preparing the test case against the British government on behalf of Michel Vencatessen, was asked by the older Ilois committee to negotiate with the British government about improved compensation. The government apparently told Sheridan that it would increase its offer if Vencatessen dropped his case.<sup>61</sup>

The government then added a further £1.25 million in compensation to its original offer of £650,000 (plus interest) but insisted that the money would only be paid if the Ilois agreed to a 'no return' clause. Sheridan landed in Mauritius in the first week of November 1979 and explained the terms he had obtained to the Ilois committee – who appeared to accept them. He set up an office to which the Ilois were invited to go and sign their form. At first, the response was good. 'I had to bar the door to them', Sheridan is quoted as saying.<sup>62</sup> But as an observer added: 'That's not surprising, is it? If you were destitute and living in circumstances which are absolutely beyond belief, in incredible filth, when someone comes along to you and says, "look here, for the first time in your life someone is taking an interest in you and you are going to get some money . . . would you like to sign a document saying you have no claim (to return)", of course you are going to sign'.

The Ilois began to sign their forms, but news of the proceedings soon reached the ears of other Ilois leaders and MMM politicians, who were outraged at the terms being offered. The procedure was quickly halted and Sheridan flew back to London with forms signed by about 1000 of the Ilois<sup>63</sup>.

The incident sharpened up the Ilois organisation overnight. A Joint Ilois Committee was formed consisting of both existing committees and, within days of Sheridan's leaving, a letter was sent to him complaining that the Ilois who had signed the form had not any opportunity 'to seek advice from more literate and knowledgeable friends, especially alternative legal advice. Thus they were unable to weigh these conditions fully before signing the document. This is why we believe that most of them consider the signing as a mere formality . . . so they could have access to the compensation, and not as an indication that they agree to the conditions attached'.<sup>64</sup> The letter went on to point out that the Ilois did not *leave* the islands but were forced out. Most of them, says the letter, did not leave with the idea of 'never to return'. Their frequent statements to that effect are proof of our assertion, continues the letter. Whilst confusion briefly reigned, the outcome was that the Ilois people were not prepared to renounce their right of return. The Ilois meanwhile were denied proper compensation. But comment on the British government offer echoed through Mauritius. 'It is difficult to imagine that a country like Great Britain should in 1979 have recourse to such an undignified procedure which, stripped of its legal trappings, amounts to bribing a person into renouncing his right to return to his homeland.'<sup>65</sup>

At about the time of the Sheridan visit, something else happened of considerable importance to the Ilois people. A group of Mauritian sailors (including some Ilois) asked permission to visit Diego Garcia and, on being refused, decided instead to sail to the Salomon islands 140 miles from Diego Garcia. There the sailors stayed for several months. The vegetation was overgrown and took a month to clear but the Ilois houses were still standing and in good order. The sailors found that living there presented few problems. They found plentiful supplies of fish, coconuts, fruit, vegetables, rabbits and fresh water wells.<sup>66</sup> What the sailors had proved was that there was no reason why the Ilois, who wished to do so, could not return to the Salomon islands and continue to enjoy their traditional life. 140 miles away from Diego Garcia, they could scarcely be in the way of anyone.

In April 1980 Diego Garcia was used by the United States as a staging-post for the abortive bid to rescue the hostages in Iran. According to the terms of the Anglo-American defence deal, the United States was supposed to consult Britain before Diego Garcia was used for such a purpose. No such consultation took place.<sup>67</sup> What was clear was that by 1980 Diego Garcia was far more than a communication or support facility, but was by then a military base, with the potential to service ships and aircraft with nuclear capacity. So much for the Indian Ocean as the zone of peace, desired by the littoral states.<sup>68</sup> (The Foreign Office has continued to maintain that Diego Garcia is 'not a base'.)<sup>69</sup>

In June 1980 Mr. Richard Luce, Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, flew to Port Louis on an official visit to Mauritius. There was speculation on the island that Britain might offer Mauritius reit for the Chagos islands. Whilst in Mauritius, Luce saw an Ilois demonstration and asked to meet their leaders. The following month, the Organisation of African Unity unanimously voted for the return of Diego Garcia to Mauritius. On Mauritius itself there was increased activity over the Ilois issue. A campaign was launched to expel the US Army from the Chagos islands. The condition of the Ilois meanwhile was becoming more desperate.

Still without proper compensation, and entering at least their sixth year of exile, the Ilois began to mount a series of hunger strikes. From September 1980 to March 1981 many of the exiles – especially the Ilois women – squatted, sang and went hungry to try to obtain better terms from the British. The culmination of the strikes came on the morning of the 16 March 1981 when several hundred Ilois women demonstrated in front of the British High Commission. Having tried in vain to get in touch with the High Commissioner, a group of Ilois occupied the entrance hall for several hours and then moved to the Government House where they staged a sit-in. A clash with the police resulted and several Ilois women were arrested. Their arrest triggered off an immediate reaction within the Ilois community. Eight Ilois women decided to go on an unlimited hunger strike in the 'Jardin de la Compagnie', facing the offices of the British High Commission. Among them was an old woman aged 77. The hunger strike was in its eighteenth day when the Mauritius Prime Minister left for Britain for talks with Mrs. Thatcher that included the Ilois saga. On 4 April 1981 it was agreed between the two governments, and Ilois representatives, that talks should take place in June.

## The Sylva Report

The agreement to hold talks coincided with a publication, commissioned by the Mauritian government, into the living conditions of the Ilois.<sup>70</sup> Written by Herve Sylva, who had worked as a teacher with the Ilois for 10 years, the report is the most thorough survey of the Ilois that has been carried out. Its most important finding is that 77% of Ilois adults wish to return to Chagos. Only 11% want to stay in Mauritius; others either did not know or wanted to go to the Agalega islands.

The Sylva Report makes grim reading. It found that only 65 out of 942 Ilois householders are 'owners of land and houses' and 'have satisfactorily remunerated jobs'. 439 households 'have applied for houses', says the report, '177 of them indicate this need as a first priority'. Housing, concluded Sylva, was the most pressing problem the Ilois faced. He found one case of 31 people living in 3 rooms, another of 21 people in 2 rooms and one case of 14 people including a lame man living in 1 room at Cité la Cure. The report speaks of Ilois living in old and leaky houses with curtains and sheets as a roof over their beds as a protection from rain. 'It is obvious that these conditions give rise to family squabbles; neighbours and landlords . . . look down upon them and press them to move on to other places. Ilois are now found scattered all over Mauritius and some of them are living in ramshackle houses in dire conditions.' Over 40% of adult males did not have a job; of the 331 men with a job, 95 were dockers, 55 labourers, 44 lorry helpers and 36 were fishermen. The jobs appear to be on a mostly temporary basis. 'Very few have permanent jobs', says the report.

Unemployment, it says, gives way to idleness and leads to sluggishness, drunkenness, gambling and finally larceny; Ilois children are 'experiencing the same conditions of living as their parents'. The report ends by saying that the Ilois community would appreciate it if the government . . . could appoint a field social worker for a period of three years exclusively for the welfare of Ilois'. It adds:

'An effort should be made by all those who sympathise and support the cause of Ilois of Chagos Archipelago in Mauritius, to help them not only in the action in pursuit of their claims but also to their complete integration in Mauritian society during and after their resettlement. The Ilois have much to add to our ever enriching Mauritian culture by their culinary art, song, dance, tales, crafts etc . . .'

The Sylva Report dispelled any notion that the British government had that the Ilois did not want to return home; but at the same time it seemed to recognise a fatalism among the Ilois people – namely that

they were pawns in super-power rivalry and that their wishes did not count. As a result, the emphasis is on integration into Mauritian society, whilst still holding out the hope of a return home one day. But what comes over very clearly is the love and identity that the Ilois feel for their Chagos homeland.

## Chapter 6

### 1981 – The London Talks

Improved compensation was the overriding aim of the nine-strong team of negotiators from Mauritius who arrived in London in June 1981 for talks with the British government. Led by the Mauritian Minister of Social Security Mr. R. Purryag, the team included the leading MMM politician Paul Berenger and three Ilois people, Mrs. C. Alexi, Mrs. L. Naick and Mr. C. Ramdas. Before negotiations began, the Mauritian team presented a memorandum to the British government which outlined the compensation which they believed was fair. In total the Ilois asked for £8 million. The memorandum referred to the 'desperate situation of the Ilois community since they were torn from their native land between 1965 and 1973'.<sup>71</sup> It said that Britain's offer in 1979 of a further £1.25 million in compensation was an admission that its original offer of £650,000 was inadequate, and it went on to urge the British government, 'to make available as rapidly as possible the sum of £8 million as a final compensation for the proper resettlement of the Ilois community'.

The sum of £8 million, said the document, had been calculated on the following basis:

Each Ilois family should receive	
(I) A plot of land	= Rs 35,000
(II) A house of 1,000 sq. ft.	= Rs100,000
(III) An allowance to start a family business	= Rs 15,000
	<hr/>
	total = Rs150,000

Each family would therefore receive a total of 150,000 rupees, about £8,000. This money, pointed out the document, should be available to the 900 plus Ilois families. An additional amount was also requested 'to cover the collective needs of the Ilois community, such as for a community centre, training and education programme, amounting to a sum of Rs 15 million'.

Talks began on Monday 29 June; the British delegation was led by Richard Luce and Lynda Chalker (Mrs. Chalker, junior Minister of Social Security, had visited the Ilois in Mauritius in April 1981 and was said by observers to be visibly upset at their plight). But, 'to our utter surprise' said Mr. Purryag 'the British team tried to avoid the points we made'.<sup>72</sup> Britain reaffirmed its offer of £1.25 million and said it was willing to provide another £300,000 in technical aid on 'full and final settlement'. The British government said it considered this a 'very fair and reasonable offer'.<sup>73</sup> The Mauritian team considered it neither fair or reasonable and flatly rejected it. Unfortunately, no agreement was reached.

After the deadlock, Purryag lashed at the British government for 'negligence over figures. If Britain had made a proper survey of the Ilois there would not have been this problem today'.<sup>74</sup> He attacked the UK government for sticking to its figure of 426 Ilois families when the Sylva report showed there were over 900. Purryag said 'they had been taken for a ride by the British government, who decided at the outset not to budge'.<sup>75</sup>

Mr. Elie Michel said pertinently and cogently: 'the British decided the coconuts of Diego Garcia were useful to them; the British decided the land of Diego Garcia was useful to them. The British decided the people of Diego Garcia were no use to them'.<sup>76</sup> Ironically whilst the team sought monetary compensation, they were well aware that money could not compensate the Ilois for the damage which had been done to them. Kishore Mundil, a member of the Mauritian negotiating team, said 'they cannot compensate people for the suffering they have caused, for the moral damage'.<sup>77</sup>

But the rejection of their claim was a bitter blow for the Ilois community. On the day following the breakdown of talks, Ilois women demonstrated outside the British High Commission in Port Louis; these victims of militarisation in the Indian Ocean made it clear they would fight on. The Tory government's handling of the issue came in for criticism even from its traditional allies. The *Sunday Express*, a conservative newspaper hardly noted usually for unstinting support for ethnic minority groups, said in a leader, 'a rotten little story is involved in the way Britain has dealt with the hapless inhabitants of Diego Garcia . . . is there nobody in the Foreign Office who gives a damn? Do the bureaucrats think it is acceptable to interfere in the lives of simple people without straining every nerve and muscle to ease the difficulty?'.<sup>78</sup> The *Express* leader highlighted one crucial aspect of the Ilois affair – namely that the Foreign Office had never had the support of the British people for its handling of the Ilois issue. The government's inflexibility was difficult to understand, even measured in terms of self-interest. Britain's willingness to abandon some 2000 of its citizens in the Indian Ocean could hardly be expected to enhance its reputation across the Third World, which, by mid-1981, was already at a particularly low ebb because of the repeated cuts in the aid budget that had taken place since 1979.

Michel Vencatessen's private case against the British government had meanwhile still not been settled. Following the breakdown of the London talks, another Ilois decided to sue the British government for wrongful dismissal from the Chagos islands. The Mauritian Prime Minister was pressed to launch a sustained campaign to bring the British government to agree to the legitimate claims of the Ilois and to raise the issue with the United States President.

Six weeks after the London talks ended, the British government gave the United States permission to undertake a \$1,000 million expansion on Diego Garcia. In addition to accommodating B52 bombers, Diego Garcia was to have a mile long jetty, supported by miles of concrete filled steel piles. This would allow aircraft carriers to be based in or near the lagoon. Barracks were to be built to allow 4,000 American Marines to be based on the islands. The British government was still maintaining it was not a base. A Dutch television company, which was planning to make a film about Diego Garcia and militarisation in the Indian Ocean, discovered that the island might contain nuclear weapons. The flat of one of the T.V. team was searched by police. In late 1981, 60 Mauritian workers left for Diego Garcia as part of the construction team to help with the island's 'development'.

At about the same time there was a little noticed development that could be of considerable significance for the future of the Ilois people. A United States lawyer was asked if Mauritius could legally claim rent from the US government for the occupation of Diego Garcia.<sup>79</sup> The lawyer, Ray Carleton Howell, affirmed that Mauritius could indeed claim rent – and that in a federal law suit, the Mauritius government could be awarded, 'between \$182 million – \$365 million annually' (£100 million – £200 million approx.). He said that it was also possible to obtain from the US government a statement on the date on which Diego Garcia will be returned to Mauritius.<sup>80</sup> The economic and living conditions of the Ilois on Mauritius would improve beyond recognition if only part of such a rent was spent on their community. The sum which Mauritius could claim shows the true value of Diego Garcia and raises the question as to why the British government could offer such miserly compensation to people displaced from such a valuable island.

The British High Commissioner in Mauritius may have been mindful of the US lawyer's advice when he was reported as saying in November 1981, 'we are willing to modify the condition concerning the return to the Chagos, which we would not wish to see as an obstacle to an agreement'.<sup>81</sup> But the Ilois people were desperate for money. At a General Assembly, shortly before Christmas Day 1981, 500 Ilois agreed to the proposals drawn up by their committee that Britain should be pressed to pay £1.25 million, plus the extra £300,000 that it had offered to help with the Ilois's immediate problems, and that the case would be carried on in UK courts for a final settlement. It was agreed that the British government should be pressed to settle for somewhere in between the £1.25 million, they had offered, and the £8 million which the Ilois believed was reasonable.

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## Chapter 7

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### 'A Full and Final Settlement'?

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During the early months of 1982, acting with a speed that was uncharacteristic of the previous 17 years, the British government appeared to be seized with an intense desire to settle the Ilois problem. 'We don't want it to just drag on', said a Foreign Office official.<sup>82</sup> Whether the speed was due to pure humanitarianism, or whether it was the impending shadow of the Falklands, together with apprehension about the inevitable comparison that would be made, will only become clear when the full records become available to historians.

On 20 March 1982 a team of British officials flew to Port Louis. They doubled Britain's offer to the Ilois to £3 million. The Ilois said no. Britain quickly raised its offer to £4 million. (This was in addition to the £650,000 already paid.) The then Mauritian government of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam offered land to the value of £1 million. Once again the celebrated rubric 'full and final' was wheeled on the stage to describe the deal. This time the Ilois provisionally accepted. A document was drawn up in which the compensation was said to be for 'all acts, matters and things done by or pursuant to the BIOT order 1965, including the closure of the plantations in the Chagos Archipelago, the departure or removal of those living or working there, the termination of their contracts, their transfer to and their resettlement in Mauritius and their preclusion from returning to the Chagos'.<sup>83</sup>

In part therefore the compensation was because the Ilois were 'precluded from returning to the Chagos' islands, although the 'no return' stipulation was not inserted. This at last – 17 years later – appeared to be tacit recognition by Britain that most of the Ilois wanted to return home and should be compensated for not being allowed to do so. Furthermore it was also an acknowledgement by Britain that, far from being contract labourers, the Ilois people had their own homeland.

On Saturday 27 March 1982 the deal was initialled, and as far as Britain was concerned the Ilois were relegated to a footnote in their colonial history. Although a Trust was established by Britain and Mauritius to administer the compensation fund, which is intended to cover the costs of rehousing and retraining, the Ilois therefore received little over half the compensation they believed was necessary to start a new life in Mauritius. Most have been scarred for life; all – far from being protected – have been deceived by successive British governments.<sup>84</sup>

Five days after the deal over the Ilois was initialled, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. Suddenly an island community found itself, not the victim of Britain's foreign policy, but virtually in charge of it. The double standard was complete.

But for Britain, the Ilois matter is not buried. In early June the Crown Law Office in Mauritius gave its verdict on the initialled agreement, saying that it found nothing to jeopardise Mauritian claims over the Chagos. If the Chagos islands were returned to Mauritius, Britain would have no power to stop the Ilois going home. A few days later, the Movement Militant Mauricien (MMM) party won a sweeping victory in the Mauritius elections. One of the key platforms of the MMM's campaign was the return of Diego Garcia to Mauritius and the closing down of the military base. Soon after taking office, the new Prime Minister, Aneerood Jugnauth, a Hindu lawyer, said that his government while accepting the agreement would do everything in its power ultimately to regain Diego Garcia.<sup>85</sup> On 7 July 1982 the Mauritian Parliament unanimously approved a Bill declaring Diego Garcia part of Mauritius, shortly after the compensation settlement had been signed by Mr. De l'Estrac, the Mauritian Foreign Minister, and Mr. James Allen, the British High Commissioner. Paul Berenger, the 37 year-old founder of MMM, wishes to make the issue of Diego Garcia part of a policy of demilitarising the Indian Ocean region.

But is it realistic to think of closing the base on Diego Garcia? What power does Mauritius have over the United States and Britain, and could the Ilois now resettle on their homeland without too many problems? If the arms reduction talks between the US and the USSR take off, then it is conceivable that the Diego Garcia base could be closed down, especially if the US was made to pay a heavy rental for the island. And whilst Mauritius has little power of its

own, with the combined weight of the OAU and the litoral states behind it, it does carry some weight.

The Sylva Report suggested that over a thousand Ilois people want to return home. A few hundred miles to the north of Diego Garcia lies the Maldives island of Addu Atoll, which like Diego Garcia was also an island where native people fished and harvested coconuts. A British RAF staging post opened at Gan, on the island, in 1956 against the wishes of the Maldives government. The base was closed in 1976. Over half the island's farmland had by then been destroyed and the local population, which had risen from 5,000 in 1956 to 17,000 in 1976, was left destitute. (The closure of the staging post was made possible by the opening of Diego Garcia as a base.)

One lesson of Addu Atoll is that the Ilois would need substantial rehabilitation assistance if they did return home. For those who wish to return to Peros Banhos and Salomon there should be no problem, other than the reorganisation of the coconut plantation. It would seem reasonable to hand over these plantations to the Ilois for local cooperative administration. But Diego Garcia is an island devastated by the military build-up. A considerable amount of money would need to be spent before the Ilois could return. Here the United States, which has so far not paid the Ilois any compensation, would seem to have a clear responsibility.

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## Chapter 8

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### The Ilois after the Settlement

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'The Trust Fund ... shall have the object of ensuring that payments of the capital (namely £4 million), and any income arising from the investment thereof, shall be disbursed expeditiously and solely in promoting the social and economic welfare of the Ilois.' Thus read the settlement agreement of April 1982.

But the £4 million compensation was only slowly 'expedited' by the British government; not until September 1982 was the money given to the Trust Fund's Board of Trustees. By that time, many of the Ilois were in desperate circumstances; whilst the Board of Trustees discussed a resettlement plan for them, the Ilois people began to clamour for an immediate payout, chiefly to help them clear off some of their debts. Under mounting pressure the Trust Fund authorised, in December 1982, an immediate payment of Rs 10,000 rupees to each Ilois (about £600). The Ministry of Lands, Housing and the Environment had organised a survey to assess how many of the Ilois wanted to be housed on the land the government was providing. But by the end of 1982 many Ilois who had at first opted for land and housing, and who were generally receptive to the idea of a resettlement scheme for their community as a whole, had changed their minds and were demanding the whole of their share of the compensation in cash.

One of the problems with distributing the compensation concerned the number of people who were eligible. Some Ilois families had come to Mauritius of their own free will in the 1950's and early 1960's; they were not forced out because of the military base on Diego Garcia. One question to decide was – should they qualify for compensation or not? It says a great deal about how the Ilois feel about their homeland, and also their solidarity as a community, that the overwhelming view was that *all* Ilois should qualify, no matter when they arrived in Mauritius. 'The Chagos is our home', said one; 'it doesn't matter whether we left before or after the Yanks arrived. The point is that because they are there, we cannot go back. They have taken our home and therefore all of us should be compensated.'

With the government slow to publish its plans for the £1 million worth of land and housing it was granting the Ilois, demand grew for a straight individual share-out of the compensation. 'We wanted to work out a longer term resettlement plan,' said Father Jocelyn Patient, Chairman of the Trust Fund's Board of Trustees; 'but the Ilois had more urgent matters to think about than the long term.' The urgent matters for most Ilois were to clear the debts they had accumulated, as a result of their enforced exile, and to improve their housing which was generally in a distressing condition. The Trust Fund therefore decided that all the compensation money be shared out; about a thousand Ilois adults each received around

45,000 rupees (about £2,700); whilst some 250 children were given on average about 8,000 rupees each.

The compensation money, which was distributed in mid-1983, enabled many of the Ilois to improve their housing or to move to better accommodation. But the snag with the individual share-out was that no money was left for a job creation scheme. With the Mauritius economy in difficulties, it was often the Ilois who were first to be laid off work. Unemployment continued to grow. A small number of Ilois, mostly those who already had decent housing, invested their compensation money in small businesses. Some purchased fishing boats and joined an already overcrowded artisan fishing industry, in which returns are low. One Ilois family bought a small shop in the Ilois area of Cassis, on the outskirts of Port Louis, another set up a small textile workshop.

Most Ilois were not so fortunate; once debts had been cleared off and housing improved, they had nothing left. Around 60% were then without jobs and most of those in work had only temporary employment. Resentment began to grow over the fact that the £4 million compensation was only one half the amount needed for resettlement. By the end of 1983 it was clear that although they were slightly better housed, the problems of the Ilois community were basically the same. 'Our houses are better but we are still in a desperate state' said an Ilois leader, François Louis, in February 1984. There were cases of hardship that went a long way beyond money. A cyclone which struck Mauritius in 1983 blew part of the roof off Ilois Marie Pauline's house, just to the north of the commercial centre of Port Louis, and she had to patch it up as best she could afford. But the roof was not her main concern. 'One of my daughters, 11 year old Ivy, has not been allowed into school for two years because I cannot produce her birth certificate. This is in the Seychelles and we have no way of getting a copy.' (Diego Garcia was formerly administered by Britain from the Seychelles.) For cases like this the Ilois have no welfare officer who might help them.

By 1983 the Ilois were nonetheless becoming more confident and better organised. Until then they had relied heavily on assistance from Mauritians who were sympathetic to their cause, especially the National Support Front for the Ilois. But in mid-1983 the Ilois formed the *Chagos Refugee Group* – the title of which clearly shows how they regard their status in Mauritius.

With the help of former Finance Minister Paul Berenger (the MMM government having been replaced by a right wing coalition in mid-1983, still headed by Aneerood Jugnath) they drew up a letter to the President of the United States government and in January 1984 presented it to the American Embassy in Port Louis. In their letter the Ilois referred to the 'most inhuman and terrible ordeal' they had been going through and said that 'no amount of financial compensation will ever make up for the physical and mental suffering' they had endured. They appealed to the President of the US to give them £4 million 'so that the proper settlement in Mauritius of the Ilois community be completed ... in formulating our request may we be allowed to make reference to the \$435 million which, it has been estimated, has been spent by the government of the United States on the Diego Garcia base over the past three years.'<sup>86</sup> Two weeks later, Ilois representatives say they were told verbally by the American Embassy that compensation was a matter for the British. Infuriated by this, the Ilois community demonstrated outside the British High Commission in Port Louis. In August 1984 the Minority Rights Group presented a submission on the Ilois case to the UN Working Group on Slavery, meeting in Geneva. This included a restatement of the Ilois position and a plan for US compensation. By September 1984 the Reagan administration had still not given the Ilois the courtesy of a formal reply. Ilois representatives wrote to the US Embassy on 15th September 1984 asking for a reply and pointing out that since they last wrote 'many of us have no food to feed our families, many of us are unemployed'.<sup>87</sup>

In their appeal to President Reagan there is a note of ambivalence in the Ilois position, almost certainly born out of desperation. Whilst they asked for money to complete their settlement in Mauritius, they had formed the Chagos Refugee Group. As they felt, however, that they had little chance of being allowed back home, they believed they should be given the opportunity of a reasonable living in Mauritius.

The vast majority of the Ilois say they would go back to their homeland if they had the chance. Mother of four, Maud Alexis, used her compensation money to buy a fishing boat and from this

she makes a living. But she pointed out, 'I would never say "no" to going back to Diego; it would be a dream come true, it was lovely there.' A native of Peros Banhos, Raphael Desage, came to see a doctor in Mauritius in 1966 and was not allowed back home. He used his share of the compensation money received from Britain to buy a shop which his daughter Claudette helps him to run. 'I'd go back to Peros Banhos if I had the chance', he said, 'Mauritius is not the same.' Jules August was a woodworker on the Chagos Salomon island, and built his own house in Mauritius with the money received from Britain. Now unemployed, he has five children, aged between 14 and 24; all are out of work. 'Yes I would go back home if given the chance', he said; 'it has been difficult settling here.' 'I would go back to Diego Garcia tomorrow if I had the chance', said sixty-four year old unemployed Leonard Atchien, who left in 1973 and today lives in one room, 8 foot by 7 foot. 'In Diego it was most beautiful. The money I've had from Britain has not been enough to enable me to settle down.'

The Ilois see no reason why they should not return to the smaller islands in the Chagos group (which are not required for military purposes) and even to the eastern side of Diego Garcia itself – which under the 1966 Anglo-American agreement cannot be used by the military. A clause in that agreement refers to military installations being constructed only within a 'specified area'. The eastern side of Diego Garcia is today much the same as it was ten years ago – apart from serious overgrowth. A Mauritian priest, Father Alain Harel, who visited Diego Garcia in 1983 to hold church services, confirmed that only the western side of the U-shaped island has been developed as a base and the eastern side is unspoilt, with many Ilois houses, the post office and church, still standing – although in urgent need of repair and attention. 'There is not much time left before the undergrowth takes over', he pointed out. Diego Garcia is today peopled by a thousand American servicemen, over a thousand Filipino construction workers and 26 Britons, including four London policemen, who patrol the traffic. A gate separates the military west side of the island from the untouched east side, and servicemen who wish to visit the eastern side have to obtain permission from a British official. 'The Ilois could live on the eastern side', believes Father Harel. A group of sailors, who recently spent several months on the Chagos island, Peros Banhos, found that living there 'presented few problems'. Ilois houses were still standing but very overgrown.

Said one Ilois leader, 'It is cruel of Britain and America to stop us returning; we are being cheated out of living on our homeland. We are a colonial people – what about our right of self-determination?' Some of the Ilois want to return to the Chagos to repair their houses and tend the graves of their forefathers. 'My parents and grandparents are buried there', says Ilois Christian Ramdas, who runs a small coconut plot in Mauritius, 'surely I have a right to tend their graves.' Ramdas has sought permission from the United States to visit Diego Garcia to do this and says that the US appeared sympathetic, provided that the Mauritian government supported his request. But the present Mauritian administration appears to have little sympathy for the Ilois case. Indeed a further problem for the Ilois is that the island's politicians are not united behind their cause as they were in 1982.

Prime Minister Aneerood Jugnath now takes the view that the Ilois issue is settled. In an interview given to *Africa* magazine he was asked what he thought of the Ilois's call to the United States for £4 million compensation. He replied, 'It is just stupid. There is no Ilois issue anymore. The Ilois have been fully compensated. An agreement to which Berenger was party was signed and money has been received as a full and final settlement of all claims. For the Ilois to go to the United States to ask for more money is ridiculous; I have been asked in parliament if my government will back them. I have said it is all nonsense and I am not going to back them ... to me the matter is closed. If anyone raises the issue again, they will be acting in bad faith.'<sup>89</sup> This last comment can be seen as a deliberate slap at Paul Berenger who helped the Ilois write their appeal to the United States. Thrown off their homeland as a result of super-power rivalry, the Ilois now find themselves caught in rivalry between the politicians of Mauritius.

For Britain the Ilois issue is far from over. Even if the present Mauritius government is lying low over its claim for sovereignty over the Chagos islands (a potentially explosive conflict in the sensitive Indian Ocean, as Britain also claims sovereignty) awareness is spreading among the Ilois about the way they have been treated compared with the Falkland islanders. An incident in

early 1984 dramatically illustrated the difference. Louis Nanoun, a former resident of Diego Garcia, used compensation money, received from Britain, to buy a fishing boat capable of making the 2000 mile journey from Mauritius back to his homeland. He claims that in January 1984 as he approached Diego Garcia with the intention of fishing in its waters, he was stopped by a British warship and warned not to go any nearer the island. As his water supplies were low, he asked for permission to draw water from the uninhabited eastern side. This too was refused.<sup>90</sup> The significance of the incident has not been lost on the Ilois. 'Here we have a British warship preventing a British citizen from fishing peacefully off his own homeland', said one, 'very different to how the Falkland islanders have been treated.' The Foreign and Commonwealth Office denied knowledge of the incident, but the Ilois believe that Nanoun is telling the truth.

By October 1984 the mood among the Ilois was one of 'increasing unrest and dissatisfaction' says Kishore Mundil, coordinator of the *Komite Moris Losean Indien* – the Indian Ocean Committee – which includes in its ranks Mauritians from the National Support Front for the Ilois (disbanded in November 1983 to allow the Indian Ocean Committee to be set up with an 'ocean-wide' perspective). There are several reasons for the unrest, believes Mundil; practically no progress has been made on the two sites the government gave for housing for the Ilois; the Ilois representatives on the Trust Fund are disillusioned with the fund, and meanwhile the job situation is getting worse. About £250,000 was then still left in the Fund but was held up by the government pending a decision on how this remaining money should be distributed.

Behind the unrest is the deep love and affection that the Ilois have for their homeland. 'Every day I think of Diego Garcia', says Charlasia Alexis, an Ilois who has been in the forefront of her community's struggle for justice, 'and I can't stop the tears coming to my eyes.'

## CONCLUSION

There are still many unanswered questions that surround the treatment of the Ilois. Did the British government mislead the US government, in the 1960's, into believing that Diego Garcia was uninhabited? Did Harold Wilson, Britain's Prime Minister in 1965, know what his own Foreign Office was doing when he expressed the view that Britain would never impose a military base upon an unwilling population?<sup>91</sup>

Why did the British government portray the Ilois as 'born and bred' in the Chagos (in their 1950's film) and as 'contract labourers', twenty years later? Were the Ilois ever asked, at any stage, during the early 1960's, about what they wanted? Why did the whole affair have to be kept so secret? Why are the inhabitants of the Chagos islands so different to the inhabitants of the Falkland islands?

These questions and others should be answered. The tragic story of the Ilois people cries out for a full inquiry into the circumstances which caused Britain to maltreat this hitherto peaceful minority group. Such an inquiry would be helpful for future policy towards minorities. If the inner working of the Foreign Office over the Ilois issue became known, then there would be a better chance of avoiding another debacle of this kind.

An inquiry is needed, both because of the damage inflicted on the Ilois people and to head off any damage that the Foreign Office could subsequently inflict on other communities. Britain was not prepared to let Argentina get away with aggression over the Falklands. The same standard must apply equally anywhere else. The role of the US Pentagon, and of military planners in general, is yet a further mysterious element in the Ilois affair. The Pentagon wanted Diego Garcia and seemed determined to get it. Even if the US government was misled by Britain into thinking the island was uninhabited, a scanning of the literature on Mauritius would have revealed that there were people on the Chagos. The way that a minority group became the victims of the cold war, unhampered by effective democratic scrutiny, in either Britain or the US, is a considerable cause for concern.

The suffering of the Ilois is too deep to be redeemed. But if there is now constructive questioning and probing into their case, then the suffering of 2000 people who have been denied the right to live in their homeland may not have been entirely in vain.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Diego Garcia: The Islanders That Britain Sold', *Sunday Times*, 21 September 1975.
- <sup>2</sup> These 3 islands were previously part of the Seychelles.
- <sup>3</sup> Treaty Series No. 15 (1967) Cmnd 3231 HMSO, London.
- <sup>4</sup> The strategic value of Diego Garcia's geographical position is stressed in: 'Diego Garcia, 1975: The Debate Over the Base and the Island's Former Inhabitants'. Hearings before the Special Sub-committee on Investigations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, First Session, 5 June and 4 November 1975. The US Government Printing Office Washington, 1975. (In the United States, Diego Garcia is recognised as a 'base'. The British government has consistently denied that the island is a base.)
- <sup>5</sup> Ilois is Creole for 'islanders' and has been used since the nineteenth century to describe the inhabitants of the Chagos islands.
- <sup>6</sup> *Washington Post* editorial, 11 September 1975.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* US Hearings p. 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Françoise Botte, 'The Ilois Community and Ilois Women', University of Mauritius, 1980, page 5. Ms Botte is a teacher and social worker amongst the Ilois.
- <sup>9</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 6
- <sup>10</sup> A 1976 Foreign Office 'Note on the Establishment of the BIOT and Subsequent Developments' speaks of 'payment of compensation to the Mauritian government for loss of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago (£3 million)'. The Chagos islands were administered by Britain as part of Mauritius, but the compensation payment shows that Britain recognised Mauritian sovereignty over the Chagos.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Diego Garcia: The Islanders That Britain Sold', *Sunday Times*, 21 September 1975.
- <sup>12</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 8.
- <sup>13</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Foreign Office, 1976 Note, *ibid.* Only a small number of people appear to have migrated to the Chagos from the Seychelles. In the 1971-73 evacuation, the few Seychellian Ilois were taken to the Seychelles.
- <sup>17</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Revealed in 'Britain's Other Islanders', Granada TV, 'World in Action', 21 June 1982.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Scott quoted in *Sunday Times*, *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *The Guardian*, 7 March 1977.
- <sup>21</sup> Britain's administrator of the Chagos islands did not normally reside in any of the islands, but in the Seychelles, usually making an annual visit to the Chagos.
- <sup>22</sup> 'World in Action', *ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> 'Report On The Survey On The Conditions Of Living Of The Ilois Community Displaced From The Chagos Archipelago', Herve Sylva, May 1981, Port Louis.
- <sup>24</sup> Mauritius Campaign to get back Diego Garcia and Expel the US Army, 1981, Port Louis.
- <sup>25</sup> David B. Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 9 September 1975.
- <sup>26</sup> Foreign Office, 1976 Note, *ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Sunday Times*, *ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> 'The Struggle of the Chagos People for their Rights and their Home Islands'. National Support Front for the Ilois, June 1981, Port Louis, page 5.
- <sup>29</sup> Foreign Office, 1976 Note, *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid.*, page 79.
- <sup>31</sup> Botte, *ibid.*, page 24.
- <sup>32</sup> Foreign Office, 1976 Note, *ibid.*

- <sup>33</sup> 'World in Action', *ibid*.
- <sup>34</sup> 'The Struggle of the Chagos People ...' page 6, *ibid*.
- <sup>35</sup> Document prepared by the Comité Ilois, 1980, Port Louis.
- <sup>36</sup> 'World in Action', *ibid*.
- <sup>37</sup> The money was supposed to help the Ilois build houses and establish pig rearing cooperatives. The 'pig' idea received no support from the Ilois and was abandoned.
- <sup>38</sup> Foreign Office, 1976 Note, *ibid*.
- <sup>39</sup> British Government Note, *ibid*.
- <sup>40</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid*, page 1.
- <sup>41</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid*, page 3.
- <sup>42</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid*, page 6.
- <sup>43</sup> *Sunday Times*, *ibid*.
- <sup>44</sup> Ottaway, *ibid*.
- <sup>45</sup> *Sunday Times*, *ibid*.
- <sup>46</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid*, page 46.
- <sup>47</sup> US Hearings, 1975, *ibid*, pages 71/72.
- <sup>48</sup> Botte, *ibid*, page 25.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Congressional Record': Proceedings and Debates of the 94th US Congress, 22 July 1976, Washington.
- <sup>50</sup> Comité Ilois document, *ibid*.
- <sup>51</sup> Letter to John Hastings from Foreign Office official.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Guardian*, 26 January 1976. The report was to be kept secret until the autumn of 1976.
- <sup>53</sup> The Prosser Report, 1976, British Government.
- <sup>54</sup> The Prosser Report, *ibid*.
- <sup>55</sup> The Prosser Report, *ibid*.
- <sup>56</sup> Pierre Benoit, *Week End*, Port Louis, 16 April 1978.
- <sup>57</sup> Sylva Report, *ibid*. The report said that the adult population was 1,159 and the child population (under 18) 1,708, of whom 1,593 had been born outside the Chagos since 1965. This phenomenally high rate of population growth among the Ilois seems likely to be a result of their poverty.
- <sup>58</sup> Conversation between the author and George Champion, 1977.
- <sup>59</sup> *Le Maurician*, September 1978, Port Louis.
- <sup>60</sup> Extract from the legal document which the British government hoped the Ilois would sign (full text is appended).
- <sup>61</sup> Remark said by G. Champion to have been made to him by B. Sheridan.
- <sup>62</sup> John Hooper, *The Guardian*, 19 January 1980.
- <sup>63</sup> Sheridan's estimate.
- <sup>64</sup> Letter from the Joint Ilois Committee to B. Sheridan, 25 November 1979.
- <sup>65</sup> 'The Struggle of the Chagos People ...' *ibid*, page 2.
- <sup>66</sup> Information contained in a letter to G. Champion, from Jinny Earle, a teacher in Mauritius.
- <sup>67</sup> Sir Ian Gilmour, then Lord Privy Seal, told the House of Commons on 25 April 1980 that the British government was not consulted about the operation but had been informed about the possibility of a rescue attempt; 25 April, 1980.
- <sup>68</sup> 1971 UN Resolution 2832 on the Indian Ocean.
- <sup>69</sup> It maintains it is a 'defence facility' on the ground that US forces are not permanently stationed there.
- <sup>70</sup> Sylva Report, *ibid*.
- <sup>71</sup> Memorandum to the UK Government from the Government of Mauritius, 19 March 1981.
- <sup>72</sup> Press Briefing, 3 July 1981.
- <sup>73</sup> Foreign Office 'Note on Diego Garcia and the Ilois', July 1981.
- <sup>74</sup> Press briefing, *ibid*.
- <sup>75</sup> Press briefing, *ibid*.
- <sup>76</sup> Press briefing, *ibid*.
- <sup>77</sup> 'World in Action', *ibid*.
- <sup>78</sup> *Sunday Express* leader, 5 July 1981.
- <sup>79</sup> The Seychelles is reported to receive an annual rent from the United States for the site of an American tracking station.
- <sup>80</sup> Newsletter on Diego Garcia and the Ilois, National Support Front, Port Louis, January 1982.
- <sup>81</sup> Newsletter, *ibid*.
- <sup>82</sup> Conversation between Foreign Office official and author, March 1982.
- <sup>83</sup> Agreement Between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Mauritius. April 1982.
- <sup>84</sup> Quoted in the *Financial Times*, 17 June 1982.
- <sup>85</sup> Agreement, *ibid* (as footnote 83).
- <sup>86</sup> Letter from five elected representatives of the Ilois on the Trust Fund to President Reagan, 24 January 1984.
- <sup>87</sup> Letter from five elected representatives of the Ilois on the Trust Fund to the United States Embassy, 15 September 1984.
- <sup>88</sup> *ibid* (as footnote 3).
- <sup>89</sup> 'Africa' magazine, September 1984.
- <sup>90</sup> Conversation between Louis Nanoun and Jack Sheppard, February 1984.
- <sup>91</sup> *Sunday Times*, *ibid*.

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## APPENDIX 1

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### A Brief History of the Indian Ocean, by Jean Harris

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Although some evidence exists of early Egyptian and Indian voyages in the Indian Ocean, it is not until the Roman period that brisk commerce flourished in all of the Indian Ocean north of the equator. The southern region was unknown to the 'ancients'. Records of these voyages exist in writings of Pliny the Elder, Ptolemy, and in a navigation guide written by an anonymous Greek-Egyptian in 225 A.D. In the 5th century and 6th century the Persians eclipsed the Romans as the traders of the Indian Ocean and even reached China, according to some reports. In the 7th century Islamic conquerors either took over or strongly influenced most of the known world surrounding the Indian Ocean. This Empire reached its height in the 10th century, but even after that it continued to take the leading role in the trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, essentially denying the Indian Ocean to Christian Europe. The east coast of Africa was Islamicized and the Arabs established themselves on the Comoros and at several points on the coast of Madagascar. They discovered the archipelago of the Seychelles and the Mascarenes (Mauritius), but left them unsettled (and they had no indigenous population).

In the 15th century the great 'pirate' expeditions of the Ming Emperors penetrated and explored the coasts and islands of the Indian Ocean. These expeditions declined with the decay of the Ming Dynasty.

Portugal finally reopened the Indian Ocean to the European Christian world when Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope from the Atlantic. The Portuguese had spent almost a century finding this route around the Cape, yet it took them a mere fifteen or so years to seize all the key ports of the Indian Ocean. They occupied Mozambique, but contented themselves with exploring the other islands and giving each a Portuguese name. Pepper was the most sought after product as well as slaves, ivory and gold from the coast of Africa. These particular Portuguese did not draw a clear line between themselves and the people already settled in the areas and they intermingled and adopted some of the local manners and a combination of Portuguese and the local languages became the *lingua franca* of the Indian Ocean ports. Portuguese influence waned for various reasons and Dutch power in the Indian Ocean was on the rise by the end of the 16th and into the 17th century. Their sailors used the 'roaring forties', the winds of the fortieth

south parallel, to sail direct to Indonesia and even Australia. The Portuguese held only Mozambique by the end of the 17th century.

Strong competition developed between the Dutch and the English for the lucrative trade in spices, silk, cotton goods, sugar, leather, coffee, and tea. Holland sided with France in the conflict with the English and by 1815, on the defeat of the French Empire, all the Dutch holdings in Africa and Asia were taken over by the English with the exception of Indonesia. The East India Company, backed by the Royal Navy, dominated the area, though Australia was the only territory which the British colonized.

France asserted itself in the Indian Ocean from the early 17th century onward, sailing ships from Brittany and Normandy and forming the first 'Compagnie des Indes' in 1664. They took Mauritius over from the Dutch, as well as the Seychelles and Chagos, and these islands were colonized by French, mostly from Brittany. They imported slaves from the east coast of Africa as a cheap and plentiful source of labour. After 1815 and the fall of the French Empire, the French retained only the island of Bourbon (now Reunion). However, French dominance on Madagascar occurred in the 19th century and continued until the second half of the 20th century.

In 1876 when Victoria became Empress of India, the Imperial Era was launched. The opening of the Suez canal marked the last step of the expansion of power and influence by the West into the world of the Indian Ocean. When George V was crowned at Delhi, the British Empire encompassed practically all the territory surrounding the Indian Ocean from Suez to Singapore. The 20th century also saw the resurgence of the influence of the Portuguese, Dutch and French in the Indian Ocean and especially the French in Madagascar and the Comoros.

The First World War did not affect the Indian Ocean to any great extent, but many of the events of the Second World War were played out in that arena. At the end of the war it was clear that England could no longer maintain her hegemony over the area. The war speeded decolonization by leaving impoverished colonial powers who could ill afford empires, even if the forces of liberation had not existed.

Always an important crossroads of world trade routes, the Indian Ocean today assumes an even greater importance because of the dependence of the developed world on petroleum and its need for routes through the Indian Ocean. Both the US and the USSR have maintained a Naval presence in the Indian Ocean since 1968. In 1973, France ceded its bases in Madagascar to that country, but it continues to maintain a base on Reunion. An arrangement by the French with the Comoros, negotiated in 1979, guarantees that archipelago's defence. The US has extended the operations of the 6th and 7th Fleets to the Indian Ocean, and has negotiated wide use of facilities in Kenya and Somalia. It is negotiating for use of facilities in Oman. The USSR uses bases in Ethiopia and South Yemen. The Chinese are reappearing after five centuries through technological missions, especially in Tanzania.

India exploded its first nuclear device in the Indian Ocean in 1974 and though it emphasizes that it will never use nuclear power for warlike purposes, its development is a serious new factor, as well as the rumoured nuclear capability of Pakistan and South Africa. The neutralization of the Indian Ocean has been discussed at conferences of non-aligned nations since 1961 and the subject has been introduced and approved before the General Assembly of the United Nations every year since 1971. So far nothing concrete has been accomplished.

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## **The Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros**

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The Comoros were untouched by the European colonization until 1841 when the French occupied Mayotte, whose port Dzaoudzi is the best in the archipelago.

There are divergent views about the settlements prior to European occupation. The inhabitants appear to be African but with significant portions of Arabic features in the northern islands and of Malagasy blood on Mayotte. According to some theories, African settlers came in the 5th century A.D., followed by intrusions of Malagasy, Shirazi, and Zanzibari. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Malagasy immigration increased.

The people think of themselves as Comorian, though at times there are strong inter-island rivalries arising from the divergent cultural and historical background of the people. The Arab and Islamic influence is the most unifying factor.

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## **The Republic of Maldives**

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The Maldives were probably settled in the 4th or 5th century B.C. by Aryan people from Ceylon. The population today are descendants of Vedda, Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Negro and Indian ancestors. The Arabs and Negroes arrived in the 9th century and the Indians came in the 17th century. The Indian population has stayed somewhat apart and still speaks Hindi, whereas the rest of the people speak Divehi, which has important elements of both Hindustani and Arabic. Since the 12th century, the inhabitants have been Sunni Muslims, but the Indians who migrated here were of the Shiite branch. Also from the 12th century until 1968 there was an hereditary Sultanate, though the Maldives were ruled indirectly from Ceylon during the British hegemony in the area.

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## **The Republic of Seychelles**

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The Seychelles were uninhabited until the age of colonization. Arab merchants probably knew the islands. Vasco da Gama came across them and made the first known historical reference to them. In 1608, one Alexander Sharpeigh, sailing for the British East India Company, landed on the Seychelles (probably Mahé) to seek water and recorded that there seemed to be no inhabitants. Thereafter the islands became a haven for pirates and privateers. In 1778, French soldiers landed, and set up a base. More settlers followed accompanied by even more slaves. A colourful Frenchman, Chevalier de Quincy, administered the islands, running up the French or British flags depending on whose war ships happened to be in port, but finally in 1810 Mauritius and the Seychelles became British. The Seychelles were administered as a dependency of Mauritius, but in 1903 they became a separate crown colony. In 1976 the Republic of the Seychelles came into being.

The Seychellois are a mixture of liberated slaves of African origin, Europeans, Chinese, Indians and Arabs. Colour was a traditional status determinant in the past with the 'grands blancs' being the wealthiest and most powerful citizens. Today there seems to be an exemplary racial harmony among the people of the islands.

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## **APPENDIX 2**

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The document overleaf is the one which the British government hoped that the Ilois people would sign in 1979, renouncing their right to return home, in return for additional compensation.

## DEED OF ACCEPTANCE & POWER OF ATTORNEY

This is the Deed of me<sup>(1)</sup> .....  
 ..... and the adult members  
 of my family who have hereunto subscribed their names and seals.

I am an Ilois who left that part of British Indian Ocean Territory known as<sup>(2)</sup> .....  
 ..... in the ship<sup>(3)</sup> ..... on the ..... day of ..... 19.....  
 never to return. My family who came with me then are<sup>(4)</sup> .....

..... and the following children

ADULT CHILDREN'S NAMES	ADDRESSES	DATES OF BIRTH
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INFANT CHILDREN'S NAMES	ADDRESSES	DATES OF BIRTH
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We know that the United Kingdom has already paid the Mauritian Government £650,000 for the resettlement of the Ilois people who came to Mauritius following the setting up of British Indian Ocean Territory and has offered to make available a further £1,250,000 for that purpose provided it is accepted by the Ilois in full and final settlement of all claims whatsoever upon the United Kingdom by the Ilois arising out of the following events: the creation of British Indian Ocean Territory, the closing of the plantations there, the departure or removal of those living or working there, the termination of their contracts, their transfer to and resettlement in Mauritius and their prohibition from ever returning to the Islands composing British Indian Ocean Territory ('the events') and of all such claims arising out of any incidents or circumstances occurring in the courts of the events or out of the consequences of events, whether past, present or to come ('their incidents circumstances and consequences').

So that this money may be paid to help the Ilois

1. We appoint Bernard Sheridan of 14 Red Lion Square, London WC1 as our Attorney in accordance with S.10 of the Powers of Attorney Act 1971 and in particular we authorize him to receive the £1,250,000 on behalf of the Ilois in such instalments and amounts and subject to such conditions as he in his absolute discretion and without need to make further reference to us, may agree with the United Kingdom Government
2. We appoint him as our solicitor to act on our behalf in relation to all matters connected with the payment of the £1,250,000 and I,<sup>(5)</sup> authorize him to act on behalf of my infant children named above as their next friend
3. We accept the money already paid to the Mauritian Government and the money to be paid to Mr. Sheridan as aforesaid in such instalments as he shall agree in full and final settlement and discharge of all our claims however arising upon the United Kingdom Government (both upon the Crown in right of the United Kingdom and the Crown in right of British Indian Ocean Territory) and upon its servants agents and contractors in respect of the events their incidents circumstances and consequences and we further abandon all our claims and rights (if any) of whatsoever nature to return to British Indian Ocean Territory
4. We understand accept and agree that by entering into this Deed we shall not be able to sue the United Kingdom Government in respect of the events their incidents circumstances and consequences and hereby covenant not to do so
5. We agree that all questions concerning the validity and construction of this Deed and any disputes arising upon it shall be governed by English law and justiciable only in English Courts

(1) Insert name and address of head of family  
 (2) Insert name of Island  
 (3) Insert name of ship and date of leaving BIOT  
 (4) Insert name and address of wife  
 (5) Insert name of head of family

IN WITNESS whereof we have executed this Deed this ..... day of ..... 1979.

SIGNED SEALED AND DELIVERED by }  
 the said ..... }

in the presence of:

FAMILY SIGNATURES FOLLOW

---

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