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History

- 1 It was in 1776 that the first group of people was sent to the Chagos Islands and the settlement was on the Island of Diego Garcia. By the end of the 18th century the population was 300. From 1773 to 1810, the importance of the Chagos was greater than that of the island of Rodrigues. A total of 81 commercial ships visited the place coming from Ile de France (Mauritius). Rodrigues from the same period had only 30 visits from Mauritius.
- 2 This French colony officially became British in 1814, with the treaty of Paris. Around 1828, Britain decided occasionally to send slaves there to live permanently. The traditional plays and music of Chagossians, now exiled in Mauritius, and Seychelles originate from West Africa. The majority of the early slaves in the Chagos seems to have come certainly from Senegal.
- 3 The population of the Chagos grew rapidly. In 1851, there were 334 persons. In 1881, 789 persons were recorded in the population census¹ and at the beginning of the 20th, the population consisted of 60% of African and Malagasy origin and 40% were of South Indian, Tamil origin. The majority of the population was native.²
- 4 Sir Robert Scott, a former Governor of Mauritius, visited the Chagos in the 1950s. He described it as a dream island, in a similar way that did the English captain James Horsburgh who was shipwrecked there in 1786.
The main islands of the Chagos that were inhabited were Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon, in all 54 islands.
- 5 In 1965, the tragedy of the Chagossians began. According to Mister Robin Cook, then British MP (now foreign Minister of Britain), « *while Diego Garcia was still in its infancy the island of Aldabra was considered as the site for the base but rejected because of the danger of disturbing giant tortoises and other wild animals. So Diego Garcia was chosen as a sort of*

compromise with the US Navy and Air Force. » For that the American Admiral Elmo Zumwalt had made it very clear to the British when he said:

« My own personal desire was to have no « indigenous » labourers on the island because I could foresee the kind of political complication that the Soviets always make when you have that kind of « indigenous » population. Therefore, I strongly advocate that there be none there when we take over and establish the base » (Ram Mannick 1982: 13-14).

- 6 Britain and the United States of America agreed to place the welfare of the giant tortoises above that of the Chagossians.
- 7 Britain was forced on her own by its former colony, the USA to depopulate the Chagos of its indigenous population of British subjects, and force them into exile in a foreign country, against all the principal of the United Nations, the principles of human rights and the *Magna Carta*, a unique case, perhaps without precedent, in the British colonial history.

Tragedy and Exile

- 8 In April 1965, Mr. Anthony Greenwood, the British Foreign Secretary, visited Mauritius. It was before the constitutional conference for Mauritian independence was settled. During his visit, it was agreed then, in a secret meeting between Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and Mr. Anthony Greenwood, that Mauritius would have its independence without the Chagos and that a meagre sum of 3 millions pounds would be paid by Britain for the loss of the Chagos Islands, with a land area of 60 sq km and 54,400 sq km of ocean. Mr. Harold Wilson was so pleased with the deal that he said later that Dr. Ramgoolam was his best Prime Minister ! During the negotiation Dr. Ramgoolam was alleged to have told Mr. Greenwood that Britain could take all the Chagos islands. In return, Mauritius would like to have Seychelles. Three years later, Mauritius had its independence and Chagos and its inhabitants remained British.
- 9 In November 1965, with the creation of British Indian Ocean Territories, (BIOT), along with Chagos, Britain also detached three islands, Desroches, Aldabra and Farquhar, from its colony, the Seychelles, to form her new colony. Seychelles regained its three islands at independence in 1976. BIOT citizens born on those three islands from 1965 to 1976 were not an issue during the negotiation of the return of the islands to the Seychelles. In Aldabra, when still BIOT, there was only one birth. The boy is now in Brussels trying to get a BIOT passport.
- 10 Soon after creating the BIOT in 1965, Britain decided to exile the Chagossians, its own citizens, in small groups to Mauritius. Up to early 1971, their arrival went practically unnoticed until most of Chagossians wanted to return to their native land but were told that there was no boat available. The media started to write about it. The authorities took the decision to send them via Seychelles to Agalega.
- 11 The first group of « human cargo » arrived on the Seychelles on the 500 ton cargo ship the *Nordvaer* (« the boat of shame ») on Thursday 30th September 1971. There were 146 persons in a boat that was legally allowed to carry only 12 cabin passengers. Some bitter experiences followed this evacuation. When the *Nordvaer* got to Mahé, four horses which she transported were taken care of and sheltered. The « human cargo » was deposited on the jetty with all their belongings. The « Créole des îles » were later

on taken to Her Majesty's prison (women prison at Union Vale), where they were confined to cells, and fed on prisoner's food.³

- 12 Those who were Seychellois and who had been working on the Chagos for many years were left on their own on the jetty. With no money from their broken contract, they were forced to sleep under shop verandahs for some time until their relatives were contacted.
- 13 Mr. Philibert Loizeau of the opposition party, then, the « Seychelles Peoples United Party », went to photograph these poor Chagossians. He was overpowered by the prison guards who confiscated his camera. Later, the British Governor allowed the return of his camera without the films.
- 14 After spending nine days of captivity in prison, the Chagossians left Mahé on the *Mauritius* on 8th October 1971. Before boarding the *Mauritius*, they were offered employment by Paul Moulinie and Company (who was managing BIOT and Agalega) on Agalega island so as to keep their deportation secret and out of contact with those that had already arrived in Mauritius. They refused after having been deceived by the same company. They were then taken to Mauritius.
- 15 Many more boat trips were made from the Chagos with « human cargo » to Mauritius via Seychelles. Those who transited on the « Isle of Farquhar » were allowed to sleep under a shed at the end of the Long Pier while the boat was in Port Victoria. Another case that is worth mentioning was the *Nordvaer* which arrived on 1st June 1973. The « human cargo » was not allowed to disembark while she was in port. At 23.30, on 2nd June 1973, one woman, Mrs Raymonde Desir of Peros Banhos, gave birth to a boy in the hold of the *Nordvaer* without any assistance. After two hours, she was taken to the hospital to have a check-up. Then, she was taken back on the boat on the same day to leave for Mauritius. Her son, Georges Désiré Désir, is now in Mauritius, without proper papers. On one voyage from the Chagos, the *Nordvaer* carried a cargo of 208 Chagossians in her hold, they were the slaves of the modern society.
- 16 In 1950, the British government, in a beautiful film, portrayed the Chagossians as « born and bred » in the Chagos. Later in 1976, the British Government contradicted itself by saying that all the Chagossians were migrated labourers from Seychelles and Mauritius. In 1969, Mr. J.R. Todd, the first BIOT Administrator, described the Chagos population as follows (1969: 19): « *In addition to Seychellois and Mauritius, there are a number of persons employed who were born in Chagos and whose parents and some cases whose grandparents who were also born in the islands.* » Legal Civil Status records of the Chagos in Mauritius prove that the ancestors of the majority of the Chagossians were in fact born there. Those who are in Seychelles would have difficulty to prove their Chagossian ancestries because Britain took all their records from Seychelles in 1976 after Seychelles became a republic.⁴ 916 Registers of Civil Status Records were taken to England. These registers started from the year 1878 to 1971. Later Britain returned copies of the 1965 to 1971 BIOT registers to the Seychelles and she kept all the old registers thus making it impossible for her own citizens to have access to their Civil Status records.
- 17 The Chagossians have their own culture which is different from that of Mauritius and Seychelles. They have managed to influence Seychelles with their music, sega in particular. This could not have come with migrating labour, because it usually takes

years to develop a new culture. Their cooking is different though it seems to have been influenced predominantly by Seychellois who went there.

- 18 In 1979, Britain through the well-known London solicitor, Mr. Bernard Sheridan, managed to have about 900 Chagossians in Mauritius signed a form of a small amount of money with a clause stating that they should abandon all their claims and rights of whatever nature to return to their native land. It seems that they had forgotten that the « human rights » of the Chagossians do not belong to any Government and, therefore, it cannot be acquired by anybody.
- 19 In 1982, Mauritius signed an agreement with Britain. That agreement was supposed to be the final as far compensation for the settlement of Chagossians in Mauritius. The Iloi Trust Fund was established and Mauritius gave the Chagossians only three months to register. It was impossible as some had migrated to Europe, Canada, and some were at Agalega. It seems clear, the way things went, that Mauritius was only interested in the money and not in the Chagossians' welfare. This agreement should not have been signed by Mauritius, a sectarian independent nation. Mauritius was compelled to take care of somebody else's population with a different culture. They knew that since 1965, the Chagossians had never adapted themselves in Mauritius. The 1982 agreement is now obsolete. Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II is no more the head of State of Mauritius. It should have been re-negotiated on or before Mauritius became a republic.
- 20 In 1975, at the Seychelles Independent Constitutional Conference in London, the Chagossians in Seychelles were not an issue. At independence in 1976, many Chagossians had no birth certificates. They had difficulties in getting married, having jobs and even doing religious confirmation. With the 1979 Constitution, things went worse for they had to pay a substantial amount of money to become a Seychellois citizen, and some are still without papers and they cannot vote in elections.
- 21 On 16th December 1996, some of the exiled Chagossians in Seychelles wrote a petition to the secretary general of the United Nations and copies were sent to Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II, Mr. John Major, the President and Prime Minister of Mauritius. Clause 3 of their petition states: « *We as refugees implore you for the sake of humanity to look into our case so that a fair monthly compensation is paid to us by Britain backdated from the date of our forced exiles until our return to our mother land.* » Today, they have received only one reply, dated 24th January 1997, from the Foreign and Commonwealth office stating « *that Her Majesty's government does not consider it is under any obligation to pay compensation in this case* » yet Britain has not explained why Chagossians and migrating labourers in Mauritius have received compensation and those in Seychelles have not, and how long they will have to wait for a fair one.

Legal identity

- 22 Mauritius' claim over the Chagos was backed by the O.A.U., the U.N. and the British Labour Party declaration of 1970 (supported by Robin Cook), which said that the next labour Government will do all in its power to seek the return of the Chagos to Mauritius. All this cannot be historically and legally maintained, simply because the « indigenous » people who were forced out were never consulted and never voted on this issue. At first, Britain paid Mauritius 3,000,000 pounds, 1972/1973 650,000 pounds and another 4,000,000 pounds in 1982 to the Iloi Trust Fund, in order to assist in the resettlement of the contract workers of Chagos. Mauritius had never considered herself

as an archipelago. In elections, the population Chagos and Agalega never have a chance to vote. People in Agalega will have a chance to vote in the coming general election for the first time in their history. Chagos belongs to BIOT (Britain)⁵ and the Chagossians, over 3 000 of them are British citizens and they should have the same rights, as the 1 500 Falklanders, to decide their own future.

Mey 1999

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NOTES

1. Seychelles Archives, Ref. 2/8 P54.
2. Ms Botte 1980, P8.
3. *The People*, 3rd November 1971.
4. BIOT/19/76, 3 letters.
5. The Nelson Island which lies at about the centre of the Northern edge of the Great Chagos bank and is 95 miles North of Diego Garcia. In 1967, when the Crown acquired the Chagos islands, for 660,000 pounds, Nelson island was not included in the agreement (Todd 1969: 18) Apparently, it was the private island of Captain Raymond Parcou, Seychelles first extra Master Mariner.

ABSTRACTS

The history of Chagos people's transfer is presented and so are their legal identity and claims.

L'historique du transfert des populations des Chagos est présenté ainsi que l'identité juridique de ces dernières et leurs revendications.

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Geographical index: Chagos (archipel), Maurice (île), Seychelles (archipel)

Keywords: Chagos Archipelago, Mauritius, Seychelles Islands, Exile of Populations, Transfer, Legal Identity, Claims

Mots-clés: déplacement de population, exil, identité juridique, revendications

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