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JUSTICE | AFRICA

# 50 years ago, the UK expelled Chagos Islanders. A court ruling may mean they can go home.



Matthew Chattle/Cover Images/Reuters

Chagossians protest outside the Houses of Parliament in London, demanding a bigger say in their future.

By **Lorraine Mallinder**, Contributor

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## CRAWLEY, ENGLAND

The bingo was about to begin, but Lucienne Sagaie and Lucie Tiatous were struggling to keep their minds on the game.

As they sat in a community center in this town near London, the octogenarian sisters' thoughts kept drifting to the other side of the world, to the white sands of home.

Over five decades ago, they were among the 1,500 people whom the British forcibly evicted from the Chagos Islands, a string of about 60 islands in the Indian Ocean, to make way for an American military base.

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### WHY WE WROTE THIS

*A story focused on*

**JUSTICE**

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*People from the Chagos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, have spent five decades fighting to return home. Now that the moment is in sight, however, doubts have surfaced about the terms on offer.*

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Last month, after a lengthy court battle, the United Kingdom handed the archipelago over to the African island nation of Mauritius, which said the islands had been stolen from it at independence.

This means Chagossians will finally be allowed to return home. But for many, it is not a clear-cut victory. Mauritius and the U.K. are hammering out the details of the handover behind closed doors. And for islanders like Ms. Sagaie and Ms. Tiatous, it feels like they are once again being sidelined in discussions about their own future.

“What do they know about Chagossians?” says Ms. Sagaie of the British and Mauritians. “Do they know what it was like to leave everything behind?”



Lorraine Mallinder

Sisters Lucienne Sagaie and Lucie Tiatous, both born in the Chagos Islands, were expelled from their homeland over five decades ago and now live near London.

## Taken *kuma esklav*

Modeste Alexis had just finished a shift as a cook at a restaurant in Gatwick Airport last month when he found out the U.K. had finally ceded control of his homeland.

But as much as he dreamed of taking the next flight home, his first thought was more cynical: It's a trap.

Like many Chagossians, Mr. Alexis saw no reason he should trust either Mauritius or the U.K. To him, it seemed the pair had always conspired in *bann zafer lus* – “shady dealings” in his native Creole – when it came to the islands.

He had good reason to be suspicious of foreign powers’ intentions. Mr. Alexis was only a year old in 1967, when he traveled with his parents to Mauritius so his father could have a medical procedure there. But when they tried to buy boat tickets home, they were told shocking news: The islands had been sold.

Over the next six years, the U.K. expelled every resident of the Chagos Islands. It claimed they were temporary “contract workers,” though many families had been there since the late 18th century. Residents were forced onto ships, herded into the cargo holds *kuma esklav* – “like slaves,” as many Chagossians recall – and then dumped more than 1,000 miles away in Mauritius and Seychelles. There, they faced destitution and brutal discrimination. Human Rights Watch has called their expulsion a crime against humanity.



Lorraine Mallinder

Modeste Alexis, born on Diego Garcia, one of the Chagos Islands, works as a cook at Gatwick Airport near London.

In Mauritius, Mr. Alexis did not go to school, instead working in a furniture workshop. His mother, Charlesia, became an activist, braving hunger strikes and beatings to fight for compensation from the British for the removals. These payments, when they finally came in the 1970s and early '80s, were meager – around \$4,000 per person.

To receive the payout, Chagossians were obliged to sign away their right to return. Many couldn't even read the document, and marked it with a thumbprint.

Today, there are an estimated 10,000 native-born Chagossians and their descendants worldwide. Around 3,500 of them live in Crawley, in southeastern England, taking advantage of the British citizenship that the U.K. government has offered to them.

The question of their return resurfaced in 2019, when Mauritius won sovereignty over the territory from the U.K. at the International Court of Justice. Under the terms of a bilateral handover deal between the two nations announced Oct. 3, Chagossians will be granted resettlement on the Chagos Islands, except on Diego Garcia, where the American military base is located.

But many Chagossians, including Mr. Alexis, who was born on Diego Garcia, remain suspicious. They weren't included in the negotiations, and with the U.K. and Mauritius now deciding the fine print, it felt to them that their future was once again being decided without their say.

“They're doing a deal that will stifle our identity,” Mr. Alexis says.

# A blank space

Diego Garcia was frequently a sticking point throughout negotiations, given the strategic importance of the military base. In a compromise, Mauritius agreed that the U.K. could continue to control it for the next 99 years. But Mauritius would charge rent.



Lorraine Mallinder

Members of Chagos Asylum People, an activist group, hold their weekly meeting in Roche Bois, Mauritius, August 2023.

That potential windfall has already prompted celebrations in Mauritius, with politicians alluding to “billions of rupees” in profit and opportunities to build hotels on the other Chagos Islands.

Comments like this have left many Chagossians skeptical that the Mauritians have their best interests at heart. “For them, it will be like manna from the sky,” says Frankie Bontemps, a second-generation islander in the U.K. who leads an advocacy group called Chagossian Voices.

The U.K. government also announced that it would be setting up a trust fund for the welfare of the islanders that Mauritius would manage. That sounded alarm bells for Chagossians who remembered the paltry payouts a half-century ago.

“We’re not babies,” says Claudette Pauline Lefade, a Peros Banhos native who leads an advocacy group in Mauritius called Chagos Asylum People. Outsiders “can’t be the ones deciding for us, we who know our islands better than anyone.”

Still, some Chagossians strongly back Mauritian sovereignty. “We can just take it ... instead of refusing, instead of nothing,” argues activist Olivier Bancoult, leader of the Mauritius-based Chagos Refugees Group. He is working closely with the Mauritian government and says plans are underway to resettle about 800 people on two of the Chagos Islands, Salomon and Peros Banhos.

Back in Crawley, Ms. Sagaie and Ms. Tiatous tuck in to plates of rice and chicken. After more than five decades of struggle, neither trusts Mauritius. Explaining why not, Ms. Tiatous’ daughter, Mylène Augustin, shows a Monitor reporter two copies of her mother’s birth certificate, both issued in Mauritius.

The first, dated 2004, clearly states her mother was born on Peros Banhos. But the second, dated 2015, features an empty space next to “Place of Birth.”

“They’re trying to erase our history,” Ms. Augustin says. “So why should we believe them?”