

# For 50 years the UK government has shown little regard for the human rights of the indigenous population of the British Indian Ocean Territory

By Democratic Audit

*The British Indian Ocean Territory was established in 1965, when around 1,500 inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago were forcibly removed, and now hosts one of the United States' most important military bases. In this post **Peter Harris** discusses the military and environmental interests shaping British policy toward the territory, and argues that the human rights of the indigenous population demand they be able to return their former home.*



US troops in training in the British Indian Ocean Territory. The indigenous population was removed by the British government in 1965, but many people hope they will be able to return. Credit: Andre Spigariol, CC-NC-SA

On the tiny Indian Ocean island of [Diego Garcia](#) can be found one of the most important U.S. military bases in the world. Known as [Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia](#) to Pentagon grandees, the base is colloquially referred to as “[The Footprint of Freedom](#)” by the soldiers who cycle through it, a nickname that partly derives from the island’s distinctive horseshoe-like shape but which also accentuates Diego Garcia’s role as a linchpin of America’s global power-projection capability. This sobriquet offers an obviously flattering framing of the U.S. military’s overseas presence, but it also serves to disguise several other dark sides to Diego Garcia: narratives of [imperialism](#), egregious [abuses](#) of [human rights](#), environmental [pollution](#) and more.

The story of Diego Garcia is a story of British politics. For while the base there is a U.S. installation, the island itself is a British territory. Along with the 50 or so other islets of the Chagos Archipelago, Diego Garcia comprises the [British Indian Ocean Territory](#) (BIOT), one of 14 remaining [British Overseas Territories](#). From the perspective of Whitehall, BIOT is little more than a cantonment—an imperial jurisdiction created during the Cold War for the sole purpose of hosting British and American military forces. Officials even have promised to cede BIOT to neighbouring Mauritius once the territory has outlived its strategic usefulness, highlighting the full extent to which London values the entity only as a military outpost.

Since the territory’s creation in 1965, Whitehall’s governance of BIOT essentially has been an exercise in keeping the jurisdiction exclusively available for use by the U.S. military. Initially, this took the form of [depopulating](#) the islands at the behest of military planners. At the time of its inception, BIOT was home to [around 1,500](#) indigenous islanders, the descendants of slaves and indentured workers brought to Chagos as labour for the islands’ coconut

plantations. Ever since their [forced displacement](#), these exiled islanders—known today as the Chagossians—have campaigned for a restoration of their right of abode.

For decades, political contestation over BIOT (such as it existed) was confined to the Chagossians' [demands](#) for restitution and the UK government's [refusal](#) of the same. Yet the scope of conflict has been enlarged in recent years as environmental scientists and leading [conservation groups](#) have placed the Chagos marine environment (home to some of the [healthiest](#) shallow-water reefs in the world) on the political agenda. And whereas the Chagossians' calls to resettle BIOT always have met with resistance, officials have proven to be much more amenable to proposals made by conservationists: [in 2010](#), for example, largest no-take [Marine Protected Area](#) (MPA) on the planet was designated in BIOT waters.

Three main sets of interests thus intersect when it comes to the government and politics of BIOT: military, civilian/indigenous and environmental. As noted above, the UK and U.S. governments (and their respective militaries) value BIOT as a mid-oceanic Gibraltar, a maritime fortress that offers unparalleled seclusion and freedom of action. The Chagossians, meanwhile, cherish BIOT as a homeland, a place of origin and—for some, although not all—an ultimate destination. For their part, environmentalists view Chagos as a [pristine](#) yet vulnerable eco-system, a [natural wonder](#) in urgent need of protection.

Of course, there is a gross inequity in terms of the power behind each of the various interests. Whitehall has unchecked power to legislate for BIOT as it sees fit; the U.S. military has the ear of Whitehall, as does the environmental lobby (prominent members of which [advise](#) the UK government in an official capacity); while the Chagossians are mostly excluded from official decision-making processes, relegated to making their case from the outside-in and thus significantly disadvantaged vis-à-vis others competing for a say in BIOT affairs.

How compatible are these various imaginations of BIOT? Are they complementary or in competition with one another? And what is the impact of the manifest disparities in power that exist between the respective interested parties? In fact, the answers to these questions are malleable, and depend upon how the issues pertaining to BIOT are framed as part of the overall political agenda. As the late and great political scientist [E.E. Schattschneider](#) pointed out, the organization of any political contest is endogenous to the conflict itself. That is, political combatants (especially the most powerful among them) define the salience of issues and delineate the circle of participants in ways that advantage themselves and disadvantage others. There is usually little natural or inflexible about political debates.

In BIOT, the politics of competition and exclusion have prevailed over the politics of cooperation and inclusion. While the military base on Diego Garcia co-exists with the MPA conservation regime, this has been achieved at the [expense](#) of the Chagossians' right of return. Despite the fact that Diego Garcia has been exempted from the provisions of the MPA and has been implicated in [ongoing pollution](#) of the Chagos marine environment, it is the notion of resettlement by the Chagossians that is cast as rivalrous (in more or less explicit terms) to "[scientific](#)" environmental conservation.

Indeed, many Chagossians and their supporters charge that Whitehall's sudden passion for environmental conservation was, in fact, a cynical [ploy](#) to bury the Chagossians' hopes of ever resettling their homeland—a suspicion given some credence by WikiLeaks-revealed [U.S. diplomatic cables](#). Perhaps in response, the coalition government announced in July 2013 that it will undertake a new feasibility study into the resettlement of BIOT. Crucially, the possibility of resettling Diego Garcia itself—not just the so-called "Outer" Chagos Islands (small, remote, lacking any infrastructure)—has explicitly been [included](#) within the remit of the study. A window of opportunity has been opened.

This new study, if conducted properly, offers the potential for a fundamental reshaping of government and politics in BIOT. Instead of resettlement being viewed as at odds with military occupation, there is now the chance that pathways can be found to co-existence between military and civilian populations (as in the case with military bases the world over—albeit usually with adverse implications for local communities). Similarly, rather than seeing resettlement as intrinsically damaging from an environmental perspective, plans can be laid to integrate a re-established Chagossian community into conservation regimes. With the requisite political will, none of this must come at the cost of environmental protection or even military preparedness.

For too long, the subterranean political milieu that underpins the Anglo-American military occupation of Diego Garcia has reflected poorly on the UK government. It is not too late, however, for officials to redeem themselves in some measure. Instead of military concerns, human rights issues and environmental protection being treated as competing roadmaps for the future of BIOT, the focus instead should be on reconciling different interests and forging a commonly agreed future for this controversial British territory.

A one-size-fits-all grand bargain might be too much to hope for, but at the very least room must be found to ease some of the most uncomfortable aspects of the current political balance—namely, the Chagossians' mistreatment and exile. After all, colonial-era laws have been [interpreted](#) to afford Whitehall the unfettered ability to legislate for BIOT as it sees fit—up to and including the exile of an entire people. Is it beyond the pale of possibility that this bottomless political power could actually be applied in service of the powerless?

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*Note: This post represents the views of the author, and does not give the position of the LSE or Democratic Audit. Please read our comments policy before responding. Shortlink for this post: [buff.ly/1pKzAyb](https://buff.ly/1pKzAyb)*

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