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The Forgotten Costs of War in the Middle East

By Tom Engelhardt

June 14, 2015

I'm sure that you've heard about the three bare-bones "staging outposts" or, in the lingo of the trade, "cooperative security locations" that the U.S. Marines have established in Senegal, Ghana, and Gabon. We're talking about personnel from Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response-Africa, a unit at present garrisoned at Morón, Spain. It would, however, like to have some bases – though that's not a word in use at U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), which oversees all such expansion – ready to receive them in a future in which anything might happen in an Africa exploding with new or expanding terror outfits.

Really? You haven't noticed anything on the subject? Admittedly, the story wasn't on the nightly news, nor did it make the front page of your local paper, or undoubtedly its inside pages either, but honestly it was right there in plain sight in *Military Times*! Of course, three largely unoccupied cooperative security locations in countries that aren't exactly on the tip of the American tongue would be easy enough to miss under the best of circumstances, but what about the other eight "staging facilities" that AFRICOM now admits to having established across Africa. The command had previously denied that it had any "bases" on the continent other than the ever-expanding one it established in the tiny nation of Djibouti in the horn of Africa and into which it has already sunk three-quarters of a billion dollars with at least $1.2 billion in upgrades still to go. However, AFRICOM'S commander, General David Rodriguez, now proudly insists

that the 11 bare-bones outposts will leave U.S. forces "within four hours of all the high-risk, high-threat [diplomatic] posts" on the continent.

Really, you didn't hear a peep about those bases either, even though *Stars and Stripes* had the story front and center?

Hmmm, that might be truly strange if anyone in this country (outside the Pentagon) paid the slightest attention to the issue of U.S. global garrisons. Of course they don't. They never have, which should qualify as one of the great mysteries of American life and yet somehow doesn't. U.S. bases abroad are just about never in the news. Few are the journalists who write stories about them, though they often spend time on them. Pundits rarely discuss them. Candidates don't debate them. Editorialists don't write about them. These days, who even remembers the 505 (!) bases, ranging from tiny combat outposts to small American towns (with most of the amenities of home), that the U.S. built, maintained, and then abandoned in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 to the tune of tens of billions of dollars – before, that is, American trainers and other personnel were sent back to a few of them in 2014-2015 for Iraq War 3.0? Almost no one, including a Congress generally eager to cut funds on just about anything, discusses the costs of preserving the hundreds and hundreds of bases of every size and shape that the Pentagon maintains globally in a fashion that is historically unprecedented. Back in 2012, *TomDispatch*regular David Vine estimated that those costs ran to about $170 billion a year, conservatively speaking, and since 9/11 had added up to a total of perhaps a couple of trillion dollars.

If you don't get the way this country has garrisoned the planet, if you never notice its empire of bases, there is no way to grasp its imperial nature, which perhaps is the point. And of course, if you haven't taken any of this in, as is likely if you're a red-blooded American, then you probably have no idea that this country has sunk billions of dollars into a single base on a single island, Diego Garcia, lost in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean but crucial to America's Middle Eastern conflicts. This also means you don't know that the Pentagon, in an act of cruelty of the first order, demanded that a whole people be exiled from their country, their lives, everything that mattered to them, everything that rootedness means in this world, so that the base could be built, staffed, and used in America's endless wars in the Greater Middle East without any onlookers whatsoever.

It's a grim tale you probably won't have heard (even if you read*Military Times* or *Stars and Stripes*). David Vine is that rarest of Americans who has found himself riveted by what Chalmers Johnson once called America's Baseworld. He's written about it vividly in *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*, a book Andrew Bacevich has termed "a devastating critique" and that's due out this August. No one knows more about Diego Garcia and the fate of its people than Vine does. (He wrote a previous book on the subject, *Island of Shame*.) So take a moment to cast your eyes to the distant edge of America's empire of bases and briefly consider some of the other costs of America's mania for garrisoning the world. ~ *Tom*

The Truth About Diego Garcia
And 50 Years of Fiction About an American Military Base
By David Vine

First, they tried to shoot the dogs. Next, they tried to poison them with strychnine. When both failed as efficient killing methods, British government agents and U.S. Navy personnel used raw meat to lure the pets into a sealed shed. Locking them inside, they gassed the howling animals with exhaust piped in from U.S. military vehicles. Then, setting coconut husks ablaze, they burned the dogs' carcasses as their owners were left to watch and ponder their own fate.

The truth about the U.S. military base on the British-controlled Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia is often hard to believe. It would be easy enough to confuse the real story with fictional accounts of the island found in the ***Transformers*** movies, on the television series *24*, and in Internet conspiracy theories about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370.

While the grim saga of Diego Garcia frequently reads like fiction, it has proven all too real for the people involved. It's the story of a U.S. military base built on a series of real-life fictions told by U.S. and British officials over more than half a century. The central fiction is that the U.S. built its base on an "uninhabited" island. That was "true" only because the indigenous people were secretly exiled from the Chagos Archipelago when the base was built. Although their ancestors had lived there since the time of the American Revolution, Anglo-American officials decided, as one wrote, to "maintain the fiction that the inhabitants of Chagos [were] not a permanent or semi-permanent population," but just "transient contract workers." The same official summed up the situation bluntly: "We are able to make up the rules as we go along."

And so they did: between 1968 and 1973, American officials conspired with their British colleagues to remove the Chagossians, carefully hiding their expulsion from Congress, Parliament, the U.N., and the media. During the deportations, British agents and members of a U.S. Navy construction battalion rounded up and killed all those pet dogs. Their owners were then deported to the western Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles, 1,200 miles from their homeland, where they received no resettlement assistance. More than 40 years after their expulsion, Chagossians generally remain the poorest of the poor in their adopted lands, struggling to survive in places that outsiders know as exotic tourist destinations.

During the same period, Diego Garcia became a multi-billion-dollar Navy and Air Force base and a central node in U.S. military efforts to control the Greater Middle East and its oil and natural gas supplies. The base, which few Americans are aware of, is more important strategically and more secretive than the U.S. naval base-cum-prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Unlike Guantánamo, no journalist has gotten more than a glimpse of Diego Garcia in more than 30 years. And yet, it has played a key role in waging the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, and the current bombing campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Following years of reports that the base was a secret CIA "black site" for holding terrorist suspects and years of denials by U.S. and British officials, leaders on both sides of the Atlantic finally fessed up in 2008. "Contrary to earlier explicit assurances," said Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs David Miliband, Diego Garcia had indeed played at least some role in the CIA's secret "rendition" program.

Last year, British officials claimed that flight log records, which might have shed light on those rendition operations, were "incomplete due to water damage" thanks to "extremely heavy weather in June 2014." A week later, they suddenly reversed themselves, saying that the "previously wet paper records have been dried out." Two months later, they insisted the logs had not dried out at all and were "damaged to the point of no longer being useful." Except that the British government's own weather data indicates that June 2014 was an unusually dry month on Diego Garcia. A legal rights advocate said British officials "could hardly be less credible if they simply said 'the dog ate my homework.'"

And these are just a few of the fictions underlying the base that occupies the Chagossians' former home and that the U.S. military has nicknamed the "Footprint of Freedom." After more than four decades of exile, however, with a Chagossian movement to return to their homeland growing, the fictions of Diego Garcia may finally be crumbling.

No "Tarzans"

The story of Diego Garcia begins in the late eighteenth century. At that time, enslaved peoples from Africa, brought to work on Franco-Mauritian coconut plantations, became the first settlers in the Chagos Archipelago. Following emancipation and the arrival of indentured laborers from India, a diverse mixture of peoples created a new society with its own language, Chagos Kreol. They called themselves the Ilois – the Islanders.

While still a plantation society, the archipelago, by then under British colonial control, provided a secure life featuring universal employment and numerous social benefits on islands described by many as idyllic. "That beautiful atoll of Diego Garcia, right in the middle of the ocean," is how Stuart Barber described it in the late 1950s. A civilian working for the U.S. Navy, Barber would become the architect of one of the most powerful U.S. military bases overseas.

Amid Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, Barber and other officials were concerned that there was almost no U.S. military presence in and around the Indian Ocean. Barber noted that Diego Garcia's isolation – halfway between Africa and Indonesia and 1,000 miles south of India – ensured that it would be safe from attack, yet was still within striking distance of territory from southern Africa and the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia.

Guided by Barber's idea, the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson convinced the British government to detach the Chagos Archipelago from colonial Mauritius and create a new colony, which they called the British Indian Ocean Territory. Its sole purpose would be to house U.S. military facilities.

During secret negotiations with their British counterparts, Pentagon and State Department officials insisted that Chagos come under their "exclusive control (without local inhabitants)," embedding an expulsion order in a polite-looking parenthetical phrase. U.S. officials wanted the islands "swept" and "sanitized." British officials appeared happy to oblige, removing a people one official called "Tarzans" and, in a racist reference to *Robinson Crusoe*, "Man Fridays."

"Absolutely Must Go"

This plan was confirmed with an "exchange of notes" signed on December 30, 1966, by U.S. and British officials, as one of the State Department negotiators told me, "under the cover of darkness." The notes effectively constituted a treaty but required no Congressional or Parliamentary approval, meaning that both governments could keep their plans hidden.

According to the agreement, the United States would gain use of the new colony "without charge." This was another fiction. In confidential minutes, the United States agreed to secretly wipe out a $14 million British military debt, circumventing the need to ask Congress for funding. In exchange, the British agreed to take the "administrative measures" necessary for "resettling the inhabitants."

Those measures meant that, after 1967, any Chagossians who left home for medical treatment or a routine vacation in Mauritius were barred from returning. Soon, British officials began restricting the flow of food and medical supplies to Chagos. As conditions deteriorated, more islanders began leaving. By 1970, the U.S. Navy had secured funding for what officials told Congress would be an "austere communications station." They were, however, already planning to ask for additional funds to expand the facility into a much larger base. As the Navy's Office of Communications and Cryptology explained, "The communications requirements cited as justification are fiction." By the 1980s, Diego Garcia would become a billion-dollar garrison.

In briefing papers delivered to Congress, the Navy described Chagos's population as "negligible," with the islands "for all practical purposes… uninhabited." In fact, there were around 1,000 people on Diego Garcia in the 1960s and 500 to 1,000 more on other islands in the archipelago. With Congressional funds secured, the Navy's highest-ranking admiral, Elmo Zumwalt, summed up the Chagossians' fate in a 1971 memo of exactly three words: "Absolutely must go."

The authorities soon ordered the remaining Chagossians – generally allowed no more than a single box of belongings and a sleeping mat – onto overcrowded cargo ships destined for Mauritius and the Seychelles. By 1973, the last Chagossians were gone.

"Abject Poverty"

At their destinations, most of the Chagossians were literally left on the docks, homeless, jobless, and with little money. In 1975, two years after the last removals, a *Washington Post* reporter found them living in "abject poverty."

Aurélie Lisette Talate was one of the last to go. "I came to Mauritius with six children and my mother," she told me. "We got our house… but the house didn't have a door, didn't have running water, didn't have electricity. And then my children and I began to suffer. All my children started getting sick."

Within two months, two of her children were dead. The second was buried in an unmarked grave because she lacked money for a proper burial. Aurélie experienced fainting spells herself and couldn't eat. "We were living like animals. Land? We had none… Work? We had none. Our children weren't going to school."

Today, most Chagossians, who now number more than 5,000, remain impoverished. In their language, their lives are ones of *lamizer* (impoverished misery) and *sagren* (profound sorrow and heartbreak over being exiled from their native lands). Many of the islanders attribute sickness and even death to *sagren*. "I had something that had been affecting me for a long time, since we were uprooted," was the way Aurélie explained it to me. "This sagren, this shock, it was this same problem that killed my child. We weren't living free like we did in our natal land."

Struggling for Justice

From the moment they were deported, the Chagossians demanded to be returned or at least properly resettled. After years of protest, including five hunger strikes led by women like Aurélie Talate, some in Mauritius received the most modest of compensation from the British government: small concrete houses, tiny plots of land, and about $6,000 per adult. Many used the money to pay off large debts they had accrued. For most, conditions improved only marginally. Those living in the Seychelles received nothing.

The Chagossian struggle was reinvigorated in 1997 with the launching of a lawsuit against the British government. In November 2000, the British High Court ruled the removal illegal. In 2001 and 2002, most Chagossians joined new lawsuits in both American and British courts demanding the right to return and proper compensation for their removal and for resettling their islands. The U.S. suit was ultimately dismissed on the grounds that the judiciary can't, in most circumstances, overrule the executive branch on matters of military and foreign policy. In Britain, the Chagossians were more successful. In 2002, they secured the right to full U.K. citizenship. Over 1,000 Chagossians have since moved to Britain in search of better lives. Twice more, British courts ruled in the people's favor, with judges calling the government's behavior "repugnant" and an "abuse of power."

On the government's final appeal, however, Britain's then highest court, the Law Lords in the House of Lords, upheld the exile in a 3-2 decision. The Chagossians appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to overturn the ruling.

A Green Fiction

Before the European Court could rule, the British government announced the creation of the world's largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Chagos Archipelago. The date of the announcement, April Fool's Day 2010, should have been a clue that there was more than environmentalism behind the move. The MPA banned commercial fishing and limited other human activity in the archipelago, endangering the viability of any resettlement efforts.

And then came WikiLeaks. In December 2010, it released a State Department cable from the U.S. Embassy in London quoting a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office official saying that the "former inhabitants would find it difficult, if not impossible, to pursue their claim for resettlement on the islands if the entire Chagos Archipelago were a marine reserve." U.S. officials agreed. According to the Embassy, Political Counselor Richard Mills wrote, "Establishing a marine reserve might, indeed… be the most effective long-term way to prevent any of the Chagos Islands' former inhabitants or their descendants from resettling."

Not surprisingly, the main State Department concern was whether the MPA would affect base operations. "We are concerned," the London Embassy noted, that some "would come to see the existence of a marine reserve as inherently inconsistent with the military use of Diego Garcia." British officials assured the Americans there would be "no constraints on military operations."

Although the European Court of Human Rights ultimately ruled against the Chagossians in 2013, this March, a U.N. tribunal found that the British government had violated international law in creating the Marine Protected Area. Next week, Chagossians will challenge the MPA and their expulsion before the British Supreme Court (now Britain's highest) armed with the U.N. ruling and revelations that the government won its House of Lords decision with the help of a fiction-filled resettlement study.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament has passed a resolution calling for the Chagossians' return, the African Union has condemned their deportation as unlawful, three Nobel laureates have spoken out on their behalf, and dozens of members of the British Parliament have joined a group supporting their struggle. In January, a British government "feasibility study" found no significant legal barriers to resettling the islands and outlined several possible resettlement plans, beginning with Diego Garcia. (Notably, Chagossians are not calling for the removal of the U.S. military base. Their opinions about it are diverse and complicated. At least some would prefer jobs on the base to lives of poverty and unemployment in exile.)

Of course, no study was needed to know that resettlement on Diego Garcia and in the rest of the archipelago is feasible. The base, which has hosted thousands of military and civilian personnel for more than 40 years, has demonstrated that well enough. In fact, Stuart Barber, its architect, came to the same conclusion in the years before his death. After he learned of the Chagossians' fate, he wrote a series of impassioned letters to Human Rights Watch and the British Embassy in Washington, among others, imploring them to help the Chagossians return home. In a letter to Alaska Senator Ted Stevens, he said bluntly that the expulsion "wasn't necessary militarily."

In a 1991 letter to the *Washington Post*, Barber suggested that it was time "to redress the inexcusably inhuman wrongs inflicted by the British at our insistence." He added, "Substantial additional compensation for 18-25 past years of misery for all evictees is certainly in order. Even if that were to cost $100,000 per family, we would be talking of a maximum of $40-50 million, modest compared with our base investment there."

Almost a quarter-century later, nothing has yet been done. In 2016, the initial 50-year agreement for Diego Garcia will expire. While it is subject to an automatic 20-year renewal, it provides for a two-year renegotiation period, which commenced in late 2014. With momentum building in support of the Chagossians, they are optimistic that the two governments will finally correct this historic injustice. That U.S. officials allowed the British feasibility study to consider resettlement plans for Diego Garcia is a hopeful sign that Anglo-American policy may finally be shifting to right a great wrong in the Indian Ocean.

Unfortunately, Aurélie Talate will never see the day when her people go home. Like others among the rapidly dwindling number of Chagossians born in the archipelago, Aurélie died in 2012 at age 70, succumbing to the heartbreak that is *sagren*.