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Your reference

Our reference

Date 21 April 1986

Dear Helen Trask

I am replying to your letter of 24 February to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (received, incidentally, on 26 March) about the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Ilois.

You may like to see the attached copies of Minister's statements on this subject.

You may also find it helpful to have the following further comments on the points you raise.

Firstly, the status of the Ilois on the Chagos Archipelago was as contract employees of the copra plantation owners. Neither they, nor those permitted by the plantation owners to remain, owned land or houses and the employees were all treated as mobile, being moved from island to island as the work required. They were employees with licences to reside there at the discretion of the owners on whom they depended for their livelihood.

With the establishment of the BIOT in 1965 the plantations, by now in long-term economic decline, were purchased by the Crown. When it was decided to make the islands available for the joint defence purposes of the US and UK governments, the economic future of the plantations could not be guaranteed and they were eventually closed.

The Ilois were given the choice of returning to Seychelles or Mauritius; the majority, some 1,200 people, returned to Mauritius where they had close ties, the last arrivals taking place in 1973. The £4 million ex-gratia payment to the Mauritius Government on 28 October 1982 for the Ilois Trust Fund was made with the express purpose of assisting with the resettlement of the Ilois in Mauritius as self-sufficient members of the community. We believe that this payment represented a generous, full and final settlement of Ilois claims, adequate to achieve its stated purpose. It was warmly welcomed as such by the Government of Mauritius which, for its part, provided land to the value of £1 million. The Ilois community in Mauritius were fully associated with the Agreement with representatives taking part in the negotiations, as members of the all-party Mauritian delegation.



Considerable progress has already been made in disbursing these funds. Members of the Ilois community visited the sites identified for the construction of housing estates, and within the first year all Ilois had been paid 10,000 Mauritian Rupees, except for those who already owned their own houses who were paid Rs 36,000 per adult and Rs 23,000 per minor. According to the latest report of the Board of the Trust Fund (which is made up of Ilois and Mauritians), the majority of the Ilois have bought or built private homes and are now settled.

As to the present use of the islands of the BIOT, I should point out they are not leased to the Americans, as you suggest. Under the terms of the 1966 Exchange of Notes, the islands were made available, as I have already said above, for the defence purposes of both the United Kingdom and the United State Governments. An undertaking has since been given to Mauritius that the islands will be ceded to them when they are no longer required for defence purposes.

Yours sincerely, Allen Brown

A R Brown
East Africa Department