

Louis Olivier Bancoult
U.S. Tour Speech 2008

My People's Struggle

Hello and thank you very much for coming. My name is Olivier Bancoult, and I bring you greetings from my people, the Chagossians, the people of Diego Garcia and the other islands of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean.

We, the Chagossians, are the descendants of slaves from Africa and indentured laborers from India. We were living for more than five generations on Diego Garcia and our other islands, working and enjoying lives of peace and happiness. Our nightmare began when the U.K. Government decided to lease our motherland to the United States to build a base on Diego Garcia. Between 1965 and 1973, the American and British governments forcibly removed my people from our natal lands, dumping us in poverty, 1,200 miles away on the islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles.

In these foreign lands we have only found lives of poverty and misery. We live in the poorest regions of Mauritius and the Seychelles

and face many difficulties like unemployment, poor health, poor education, poor housing, drug and alcohol abuse, and prostitution.

Meanwhile America has spent billions of dollars to build its base on our beautiful island Diego Garcia while we are trapped in exile. For almost 40 years now, these nations, the United States and Great Britain, who call themselves the champions of human rights, have been violating human rights in their own backyard, violating the human rights of my people.

But for decades Chagossians have struggled for our fundamental rights with demonstrations, petitions, hunger strikes, arrests, and going to jail. In 1998, my organization the Chagos Refugees Group initiated legal proceedings against the British Government to challenge our exile in British courts. On November 3, 2000, the High Court in London delivered a landmark ruling in our favour, giving us back our right to return to our islands.

Because we had no money to finance a return or rebuild our society, in 2001, we lodged claims against the British and American governments for compensation for our suffering and to rebuild our

society in Chagos to allow our return. In 2003, the British High Court said that we have been “treated shamefully by successive UK governments,” but sadly ruled against us. The American court said the U.S. Government and U.S. officials had committed no wrongdoing and ruled against us too.

In June 2004, the British Government made matters worse when it announced that the Queen was enacting two royal decrees, called Orders in Council, overturning our 2000 victory and again taking away our right to return to Chagos. With the help of lawyers and supporters in Britain, Mauritius, and the United States, we challenged the Orders in Council in British court. In 2006, we won another historic victory when the High Court ruled in our favour. The judges called the actions of the British Government “repugnant” and the Queen’s decree “null and void.” In 2007, when the British Government appealed this decision, we won our third major victory.

Now the British Government has made its final appeal. In June, Chagossians will go to the House of Lords, the highest court in the UK

to plead our case. With another victory, we will finally win our right to return to Chagos.

To build support for our case and to pressure the British and American governments to allow the Chagossian people to return to Chagos, last week I was in London to help launch a major international campaign called “Let Them Return.” As part of the “Let Them Return” campaign and with the help of a resettlement expert, we have produced a plan for the resettlement of the Chagos Islands.

Now we are calling on people from around the world to join us and support our cause. Together you can help us achieve our greatest wish to return to Chagos and achieve a new life and a new beginning for our people.

All that we are asking for is to be treated as human beings, to be given our fundamental human right to live in our native lands, to put an end to all the injustices that have been committed against us.

Unfortunately the great protectors of human rights, the United States and Britain, have not yet been able to see that to be uprooted from one's

homeland and one's way of life is a denial of a people's fundamental rights.

No matter what they say, we will reclaim our rights, our rights like every other human being who lives on the Earth has rights. I was born on that land, my umbilical cord is buried on that land, I have a right to live on that land. It cannot be that a foreigner profits from all my wealth, profits from my sea, profits from my beaches, profits from my coconuts, profits from it all, while I'm left with nothing.

Yes, we are the descendants of slaves. Our skin is black. We don't have blue eyes. But whether we are black, whether we are white, whether we are yellow, we all must have the same treatment. That is the treatment the Chagossian community is asking for. At least give us our chance to live. Give us our chance to live like every other human being.

I ask you to please join our struggle to help us stop all the injustices that have been committed against my people.