



THE PLIGHT OF THE CHAGOSIANS

By

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OUR LIFE IN THE CHAGOS

Education

Sir Robert Scott, the then Governor of Mauritius, introduced education in the Chagos in early 1950's. There was a school on the main islands and they were attended by all children. The teachers came from Mauritius. All children went to school in the morning and stopped at noon. There was no competition at school, like in Mauritius. We went to school because there were things that we had to learn, such as how to speak and write French and English. We also learned Mathematics. We used to love school and it was always a pleasure for all of us to meet in class; when I compare it with what I see today at those schools that some of our children go to, it is another world. In the Chagos, we were among ourselves, so nobody was different from each other. Here, our kids suffer from having their origins from the Chagos; they are laughed at and teased by Mauritian kids and school therefore very often turns up to be a nightmare for the Chagossian kid, unless he does not disclose his place of origin. I always was proud of my place of origin and I never refused to disclose anything, although I suffered terribly from that.

Employment

Most adults were involved in the copra industry and both men and women worked. We all had our personal aptitudes and worked according to our own personal skills. There were 32 different types of work, including but not limited to fishing, babysitting, working as maids, constructing buildings, or work with copra. Most of us had different jobs during a day.

Women were mostly involved in the shelling of coconuts, cutting grass for animal feed, cutting coconut leaves to make brooms and to cover houses, stacking copra, preparation of coconut brushes or lemon pickles for export to Mauritius.

Men were mostly involved in the heavy copra industry, construction and fishing. Some men worked for the BIOT administration; for example, some were responsible for maintaining the register of employees, others did accounting etc. Others in administration were responsible for peace and

order and were like policemen. The vast majority, however, were busy with copra, fishing, construction, carpentry and steel work. Men also maintained small animal farms and fruit/vegetable gardens. Fruits and vegetable grew very well in the Chagos climate, with tropical sunshine and high rainfall.

With everybody busy at work, there was no unemployment. The fact that all adults were active meant that we had a healthy population and very small social problems. It is a fact that unemployment brings social problems in all countries, but in the Chagos, we had none of that.

In addition to the usual salary, we would receive one or two buckets of wine for our work. We would receive overtime or more wine for extra work, which wine we would in turn sell to those who wanted more. The wages we received were in comparison to other countries and even Mauritius, low, but at the same time, it did not greatly affect us since we did not have an economy *per se* there. We all received rations of rice, salt, oil, flour, lentils, beans and salted fish. Moreover, we also received free building materials when we would build our houses.

Social life in the Chagos: the folklore

Far from the hectic and consuming life of Mauritius, we led a very peaceful life on our small islands.

There was no mad rush, we all lived according to our own rhythm, never in fear nor in stress of having to strive to make both ends meet in order to feed the members of our family. Our society was constituted in such a way that we always had whatever we wanted; there were no poverty and no misery.

We never knew the meaning of hunger, deprivation or starvation until we were moved to Mauritius. We always had plenty of food; we ate to our heart's content and drank to our good fortune. This was due to the fact that many of us, if not all of us, reared animals and poultry (chickens, ducks, pigs, turkeys, geese, guinea fowls, rabbits); we also grew fruit and vegetable gardens and vegetables that one family did not have were always obtained from another family in exchange for a vegetable that it did not have. Some of us had beehives, which produced fresh honey for the community. All of us knew how to fish and take food from the resourceful lagoon. Some of us

were full time fishermen, the rest would wish whenever they would have to or feel like it. We had the best fish, lobster, octopus and crab ever. We always had fresh fish, most often red snappers and 'babonne' which are sold at over \$25 a pound on western and far eastern markets and which we had for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Inasmuch as fish has been traditionally a significant element of our diet, we were torn by the fact that we did not have the means to get fresh fish in Mauritius; all we could have was frozen fish, which, from all angles you look at it (nutritionwise or taste wise), was a different thing altogether, if you even could get that. It is not that there is no fish in Mauritius, but on an island of 1.2 million inhabitants, the lagoons having been emptied of its fish, fishermen have to get well organised to go outside the lagoons, which make the fish much more expensive and not available to poor people like ourselves. I have a hard time imagining Italians being deprived of pasta or pizza, Chinese of rice and noodles, Americans of burgers, fries and ice cream; for us, fresh fish and other fresh sea produce were the base of our food. We cooked them in all ways and had them in one hundred different ways.

We had and lived a life that was of our own. We had our own traditions, our own culture, our own norms and values. We may physically look like the Mauritian or Seychelles 'Creoles', i.e. people of African origin, we may also share, to some extent, the same language, but the comparison stops here. We cook our food differently, we drink different drinks, we sing differently, we speak differently, we dance differently, we live differently, we have fun differently and we think differently. Although we speak 'Creole', we have a large number of expressions which come from the Chagos and which we use in our daily lives and which other Creoles in the Indian Ocean do not use or understand. We have our own festivities. As I said, we cook differently from Mauritians or Seychellois. We use ingredients that they do not use. Today, since we have no free access to these ingredients, we are forced to cook and eat differently. We have been forced to adapt to and adopt another culture, another way of living, which frankly speaking, we do not like. We enjoy wine, like everyone else, but for most of us, we prefer the drinks we manufacture on our own, from natural liquor and rum: we had two famous drinks, typically Chagossian, called 'bacca' and 'callou', made up of natural ingredients that we got on the islands. When we would drink these drinks, we would not get headaches or feeling of heaviness on the next day. We would drink and party every week as a

community and would play our own games, unknown to other Creoles of the Indian Ocean. For example, one of these games was 'bal ran zaricot'. Everybody would play this game and it brought us closer to each other, like one family. That is how we used to live, like a family where family values were very strong and respected. We have now lost all this and we are all torn apart today.

We were a very religious community. Most of us were and still are Christians; we went to church and attended mass every Sunday and always maintained faith in God. For over thirty years that we have been forcefully removed, we have maintained this faith in God and this is what is keeping us standing and alive.

Health

The food we ate, the work we did and the life we lived kept us very healthy. Diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases were unheard of on the island. There was no stress and no drugs on the island. Of course, every now and then someone would get wounded or sick and if that wound or illness could not be treated on the island by the nurse, that person would travel to Mauritius to get cured, but that was exceptional.

There was no pollution on the islands. In Mauritius, because of the pollution to which our kids are exposed, they are sick all the time. We are the poorest of Mauritius, so we live in the worst areas of the country and the most polluted ones too. In Chagos, it was different.

In Mauritius, where we live, there is no hygiene: we live in trash, so we cannot expect to live healthily. Our children are always playing in trash, with sick dogs around, in areas where there are no proper drainage and sewage systems and in areas where flies and mosquitoes infest. It is not surprising that most of our children are regularly infected. Again, in Chagos, it was different and we had no such problems.

Property

We were all owners of our plot of land and of our house. When one of us would become of age, he would choose a plot of land in a residential area, then inform the administrator that he was taking that land and he would

then build his house thereupon. We had to inform the administrator because that was the only way he could know which land was occupied or not, since there was no official register of properties in the Chagos. But there was never a problem about property; once one of us would have taken a plot, it became publicly known that this was his land and house and everybody respected other's property rights. Once we would choose the land and build our house, we would also grow a vegetable and fruit garden; we would also use space to rear animals. It was a real paradise to see chickens and turkeys everywhere; when we look back at this now, it reminded us how unbothered we were and how unbothered even the chickens and turkeys were.

Most of our houses resembled each other. There were usually four bedrooms, one kitchen, a dining and living area, an open porch and shower/toilet in each house. We were a maximum of five or six persons per house. All this is of course very far from what we have now. The surface area covered by our house and land was approximately 75 toises, which was plenty for each family. The houses were usually built in concrete with thatched roofs or in timber with branches and coconut leaves, which was more of a traditional method.

Besides our immovable properties, we had movables, which included amongst other things, our house furniture, personal belongings, animals that we reared for consumption and our domestic animals (pets). We also had employments and monthly salaries (in nature and in credit form). When we were forcefully removed, we lost all these. We lost our land, our house, our furniture, our personal belongings, our animals, our employments, and our salaries: we basically lost our lives.

OUR FORCED REMOVAL FROM THE CHAGOS

In the early 1960's, we had no idea what was going to happen to us. We had no reason to believe anything bad would happen because we were living a normal and peaceful life on our islands.

On the other side, the Americans knew perfectly well what they wanted and what was going to happen to us. The truth is that they were very concerned, not to say alarmed, that the Russians were showing much interest in the Indian Ocean and they strongly felt they needed to be present in this region of the world. They then looked for the perfect place to set up a base. They did not pick Diego Garcia first, they picked Aldabra Island. However, that island was the breeding ground for the world's largest colony of rare giant tortoises and the Americans thought that the said tortoises' tranquillity would be disturbed by the development of the island as a base. This is how and why they ended up in Diego Garcia. Lucky for them, there were neither giant tortoises there nor any other rare living species or creatures, just common regular people of African origin, who obviously rated in the eyes of the American authorities less than animals. They saw us, saw our community, our settlement and saw how we lived a happy and peaceful life. When the Americans visited us (when they were still looking for a base), we greeted them very warmly and offered them everything best we had to make them enjoy their stay with us. We were innocent and did not then have a clue why they were there. But they knew. They nonetheless decided to move us. They had no right to do that, but they did it anyway. We later learned that the British Government was offered a discount of \$11 million on the purchase of Polaris submarines from the Americans in exchange for the right to use the island; that was too good of a deal for the British and they sold our lives for that discount. The British therefore put a price tag of \$11 million on our people's lives and the Americans decided to give giant tortoises preferential treatment over us. When we look back at this, we tell ourselves that the British and the Americans never really realised that slavery and the trade of black man was a wrong thing; worst, they had not accepted that slavery had been abolished because in their mind and deeds, black people's lives could still be price tagged and were still inferior to animals.

It is obvious that the British and Americans knew they were doing something wrong because that was the reason why they tried by all means to

keep this issue of our removal top secret. In the early 1960's, the British Foreign Office and the US State Department conspired, in writing, to 'create a fiction that these islands were never inhabited and to maintain that fiction' in order to avoid serious problems at the level of the United Nations. They even lied and misled their own authorities about it. In June 1975, the Congressional Committee examined why the expansion of Diego Garcia was in the national interest, as proclaimed by US President Ford. The Committee heard from a number of persons, including one George S. Vest, the then Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs of the US Department of State. When he was asked whether there were any inhabitants on the island, he replied 'no'. That was not a lie, but he failed to say that the inhabitants of the island had been kicked out of there a couple years before. The Committee later found out that hundreds of people had in fact been forcefully removed. Ohio Senator John Culver complained that none of the witnesses had revealed earlier that there had been inhabitants on the island for generations. He went on to say that 'simply put, these people were evicted from their homes only when and because the United States wanted to build a military base. We add nothing to our moral stature as a nation by trying to sidestep all responsibility for these people'. Kansas Senator Larry Winn Jr. added: 'I just have the feeling all the way through this hearing that the American negotiators and the people involved have said "this is all a British problem and let the people sink or swim and just let the British worry about". I don't know where any human concern shows up on your part or in your report or anything else. I can't understand why we are so damned interested in this thing as a military base that we don't have some type of input or ask questions or check on the human beings that are living on this island before we kick them off at our request through the British', the Chairman of the said Congressional hearings, Lee H. Hamilton exclaimed when being told by a witness that no coercion was used in the removal of the Chagossians: 'no coercion was used when you cut off their jobs? What other kind of coercion do you need? Are you talking about putting them on the rack?' he asked.

In September 1975, the Washington Post journalist, David B. Ottaway, cabled a story from Mauritius revealing that over a thousand Chagossians were forcefully evicted from their islands to make place for a US base and he did report that the Chagossians had since been living in utmost poverty in Mauritius. He also added that petitions had been written to US and British embassies in Mauritius.

The above tells us at least two things: first, that the British and Americans were aware that they were doing something wrong since they desperately kept it secret and misled their own authorities when questioned about it; and then, when they did learn about it, officially or otherwise, they did nothing to put an end to it.

Until we were about to be removed from the islands, we were totally ignorant of what was going to happen to us. Chagossians were removed from the Chagos by two ways: (a) those who travelled to Mauritius for treatment or holidays were not allowed on the ships that travelled to the Chagos and (b) those who were on Chagos were forcefully removed.

Prohibition from returning to the Chagos

Many Chagossian families who came to Mauritius in the late 1960's either for treatment or for holidays could not, at their great despair, take the ship back home. When they would show up at Rogers House to buy their return tickets, they would simply be told that the islands having been sold to the Americans, they could not board the ship to go back, that there were no ships irrespective of whether their entire family was still there, whether all their personal belongings and properties were there and irrespective of the fact that the Chagos was their homeland.

In that respect, the ticket office in Port Louis had quickly become a desperate place of desolation: entire families would cry of sorrow for not being able to go back, but to no avail. This is how Olivier Bancoult and his mother ended up in Mauritius. It was really cheap, mean and unscrupulous on the part of the American and British to do that, but it was all a part of their carefully planned strategy to keep everything secret and quiet. We were, quite literally, marooned.

Those of us who have been in that situation were deliberately made exiles against their will.

Some of us who did not come for medical reasons but who have been offered free holiday trips to Mauritius then realised the mean trick set up by the Americans and British authorities.

Removal from the Chagos

In effect, to use US Congressman Lee H. Hamilton's words, the US and Great Britain were 'putting us on the rack'. Not only did they deprive those of us visiting Mauritius on ships to come back to the Chagos, they also cut off our jobs on the Chagos islands, cut off the food supplies imports to the Chagos, forced the Mauritian priest back to Mauritius, forced the Mauritian teachers back to Mauritius, forced the Mauritian nurses back to Mauritius. This inhumane policy decision enhanced the drain of people away from the Chagos, until the last batch of us were literally kicked off our land and forcefully put on board ships, after they gas-chambered our domestic animals.

The British and American authorities had plotted and decided that in their strategy to remove us from our homeland, it would be easier if we were starved to death and deprived of some of the things we eat daily. They therefore stopped sending milk and milk products to us. And bear in mind that they were not used to doing it for charity: we would buy these products once they arrived in the Chagos. This was therefore an embargo that the American and British authorities imposed on us; an embargo is usually a sanction, here it was a sanction for us being a bunch of black people on the way of white colonialists who had decided to challenge and go against fundamental norms of international law for their own benefit.

Many of our children grew up without milk and milk products; we were not deprived of only these items, but of other basic ingredients such as sugar, oil and flour and rice; they also deprived us of medication and other basic supplies. Looking back at all this makes us realise how inhumane was the decision to remove us from our homeland and the ways they went about it.

Then one day, in or about September 1971, those of us from Diego Garcia were asked to attend 'an important meeting' to be held in front of the plantations' manager's house. There were American and British officers there. 'You all have to leave the island. You have no choice. The Americans are coming and we do not want you here.'

Of course, we had heard rumours about this before, but this was it and even though we had heard those prior rumours, the news came as a

terrible shock to all of us. Men protested, women cried, children did not understand what was happening and were perplexed.

The British and Americans had decided that those of us who lived in Diego Garcia would move to join those of us who lived in Peros Banhos and Salomon Islands. We were told to leave behind our dogs and other domestic animals, most of our personal belongings, our furniture etc ... and to just take a bag of utmost important personal items.

We were then ordered to bring our dogs to the calorifer (a big building). Once there, our dogs, in total around 1500, were stacked and forced in the calorifer. All doors and windows of the calorifer were then closed, locking the dogs in the building. We then saw two jeeps (Land Rovers) approach the building and backing in such a way as to bring their exhaust pipes as close as possible to a door; the British and American officers managed to connect the exhaust pipes of the vehicles to inside the building; they then left the vehicles' engines running and went away. By that time, we had realised that our dogs were being killed and that the calorifer had been converted into a gas chamber. Most of us who had brought our dogs there waited to see what would happen; we tried to convince the officers to let them out, in vain. Pretty soon, we heard the dogs starting to cry, then scream painfully. It was one of the hardest scenes ever. The American and British officers failed to realise that people of African origin, i.e. the Chagossians, could naturally have pets and could naturally fall in love with our pets. We too considered our pets like members of our family; as much as it would be hard today for a white family to suffer its dog being gas chambered, it was equally hard for us there. Our children cried so much of pain and sorrow and we all cried. This is still fresh in our mind.

We were then forced to board the ships for Peros Banhos and Salomon Islands. Even though Peros Banhos and Salomon Islands were part of the Chagos, we still felt that we were being uprooted from our homeland and we in fact were. Life in Peros Banhos and Salomon were different than lives in Diego Garcia and we were emotionally very attached to our Diego Garcia. Most of us come from there.

The ships were scheduled to set sail after sunset. This was very unusual. In fact, this had never happened before. Ships always depart during full day. Once on board, we learnt from one of the crewmembers that the

American and British officers had asked the captain to leave when it was dark to reduce chances of uproar and fury on the ship when we would see the ship leaving the lagoon and getting further and further from our land. This is very important to us because it shows us that the American and British knew that our forced removal would be extremely hard on us and painful, so hard and painful and that it could prompt us to cause havoc on board.

We and our well-being were worth less than the animals'. And these were not even animals which could be consumed or which had a commercial value: they were retired old horses which simply belonged to the plantation's manager, who had arranged with the American and British authorities (and who have accepted) to have the horse carried delicately.

There were many of us who got really sick on board. Those who died were thrown in the sea and it was terrible. We still remember the screams of the spouses and children of those whom we were throwing out in the sea.

Many of us were desperate and terribly depressed. Some Chagossians even committed suicide and threw themselves at sea. We remember, in particular, Christian Simon, a 28 year old Chagossian who could not accept what was happening to him and to us, who could not bear with the sadness of having left our lives and everything we had back in the Chagos, who could not take the pressure of having to live in Mauritius, then a foreign land; he threw himself in the high seas and disappeared in front of our eyes.

When we stopped in the Seychelles, some of us were thrown in jail during the time the ship would be there. When the ship would be ready to set sail, we would be released. Yet, none of us were criminal offenders and prisoners. Since we were in the way of loading and unloading of cargo and horses, the authorities preferred to remove us from the ship and they found no better place for the Chagossians than to put them in police cells. Again, when we look at all this, we cannot help thinking how we came in the esteem of these white officers who dealt with us. They must really have thought that we were some kind of semi-humans, without rights, that just could not be housed or sheltered in camps or barracks. We had to be put in cells.

It really gives us the feeling that we were on their way, we were an embarrassment for them, we were an obstacle for them; may be if they could get rid of us permanently, they would have done it.

LIFE IN MAURITIUS

We then reached Mauritius. And our nightmare continued.

The American and British authorities had not even made any arrangements for us to be received and oriented towards places where we could be lodged. There was no one on the quay except ourselves and we were left on our own in foreign and buzzing Port Louis, who had become by then a major trading city of the Indian Ocean and in which we had no chances, absolutely no chances of surviving.

Some of us did not want to leave the ship. So we stayed there. Others left the quays, wandering around like beggars and homeless persons. It was a pity to see the children. They were horrified to see the state in which their parents were.

Most of us were very sick from the trip. Many children died a few days after we reached Mauritius. We remember the children of Noellie Talate dying out of malnutrition a few days after landing in Mauritius.

We had no alternative than to beg and live outdoor. Some of us begged refuge at the place of people who would employ them; others were lucky to have relatives, but soon were forced to leave because they were too much to handle. Imagine a family of 6 people staying over with a family in a house that has only 2 rooms. We could not blame the few Mauritian friends we had for not being able to do anything for us, because most of the people we knew were themselves poor.

Life for us gradually settled. Most of us found vacant State land and erected poor wooden structures thereupon, with rusty tin roofs which we would find abandoned. We had no food and no means to buy food. Our children were always hungry and thirsty and we could do nothing to relieve them from their sufferings.

After some days in Mauritius, we had to go and find work. And there are no copra plantations in Mauritius! Many women went and found jobs as maidservants and men found jobs as janitors, watchmen or stonemasons.

Some of the work the women were asked to do were really degrading. Mauritians knew our women came from the Chagos and knew that we had been kicked out of our homeland. That instantly became a message to all Mauritians to the effect that we were 'rejected', hence we were the lowest of the lowest and the poorest of the poorest. We then became the lowest class of the Mauritian society and we very quickly got to know what that really meant.

When we would go and ask for jobs, they would ask us if we were 'ilois' (i.e. from the islands). Our accent would give us away, but nonetheless we maintained we were Mauritians. Some believed us, but most knew we were Chagossians. Because of our social status, we were given the most degrading jobs. Many of our women who would work as maidservants would be asked to be responsible for 'pottes' of their boss. At that time, many Mauritians preferred to relieve their bowels and bladders in their bedrooms in aluminium pots, which they would keep under their beds, because in many houses, the bathroom facilities were found outside the house. Usually, these people themselves throw their things when they get up. But since we were Chagossians, we could do it and none of the Mauritians hesitated to confer to us that specific duty. It was very degrading.

We were always treated as inferiors, because we have been kicked out of our place. Mauritians found it shameful to be next to us; Mauritian friends, if any, would not mix with us in public. We were made fun of. We were a subject of jokes. Most of us therefore tried and were forced to hide our real identity, our culture and background. We were made ashamed of ourselves and of our identity and we eventually lost our own identity. We eventually lost all trust in ourselves and our children grew up feeling the same way.

Everywhere in the world, blacks are discriminated against. In Mauritius, it is the same attitude. Unfortunately for us, even among the blacks, we were the lowest and the poorest.

Many of us who worked as maids begged for food from our employers. We would then be given bread which stayed overnight and which would have been otherwise thrown away. When we would get lucky, we would be given leftovers which had been kept for many days and which our employers would not eat anymore.

At home, we would cook these hardened-bread in water, salt and leaves and feed our kids and ourselves with that. Many of us would get up at 2.00 a.m. to go and steal mangoes and other fruits in the streets of Port Louis, before the owners got up. We would collect rotten fruits that would have fallen down the road and bring home.

We have experienced and we feel some kind of discrimination against us everyday of our life. The Americans first discriminated us against the turtles. Then the British offered different treatments to people of the Falklands, as opposed to us, because they were whites and we were blacks. Then when we were forced to come to Mauritius, we again faced discrimination: if we are Chagossians, they do not like us. We have to lie about our identity and background to get even the simplest jobs such as maid-servant. Unfortunately, for employment applications which require specific details about your origin and identity and where you cannot lie, such as application to work on Diego Garcia, we cannot lie. And when we say the truth, we are again discriminated. The fact that we are Chagossians prevents us from being employed in Diego Garcia because the Americans do not want anyone of us there. It is very easy to establish this discrimination: just look at the number of Chagossians who have applied for jobs there and the number who have actually obtained jobs there. We have had to struggle all through our life against discrimination and it is still persisting today.

Our children and ourselves went and looked for food in trash; quite often, rice and other food were thrown away and we would select food which had not yet totally gone bad.

We lived and still live in shacks. Mauritius is a tropical island; whenever it would rain, our roofs, made up most often of rusty tin sheets, would leak abundantly and flood our shelter, wet our beds and destroyed whatever we had. And when we got cyclones, it was a nightmare. In 1975, we had the cyclone 'Gervaise' and in 1981 we were visited by 'Claudette'. Almost all Chagossians lost their houses (shacks) and all their belongings in

these two cyclones. Both times, we all left and went to shelter in schools converted for that special purpose. But then, after the cyclones, we had to start all over again. Of course, we had no insurance etc ...

Our children stayed home and it is not surprising that many of our children have grown into delinquents and have been subject to drug addiction, prostitution and other illegal activities. The same situation prevails today. Many of our children cannot go to school because we have no financial means. Education is still free; it is even compulsory, but if we have no money to send them on the bus, how are we going to send our kids to school? In Mauritius, we do not have free school bus system, so for the time being, there is no solution to our problem. Many children are regularly sent back home from school because they have no books or because they could not do their homework (which was because they did not have the books).

The consequence of this is that our children spend their time doing the wrong things and playing in the wrong areas; our younger kids are always playing in the most filthy areas and that is how they get infected and sick; they do not choose these areas to play, we simply live in these areas, so that they automatically get up and go to sleep in these areas. In that respect, sickness and infections linked to the use of non-drinking water has become very common among us. Hepatitis A Epidemics occur every two years in our community. All this because we have no access to hygiene.

Many of us have suffered from severe depression and other mental sickness. Although this is a problem which exists everywhere in the world, it concerns us specially because these depressions are always linked to the fact that we were uprooted from our lives and lands in the Chagos. We have lost our values, our identity, our culture and our society has disintegrated. We have lost all interest in everything and it is not surprising that many of us have become drug addicts.

Many of us are always sick with flu, fever and many of us are asthmatics. These sicknesses are related to our conditions of life and the way we live.

We were never sick in the Chagos. We ate very well and we always ate and consumed fresh produce. We always lived in very good hygiene.

Here, we have lost all this. Or we should rather say that all this has been taken away from us.

We are in a vicious circle. We are poor because we do not belong here and we are forced to live here; we are not prepared to live in Mauritius, we have never been educated to live in Mauritius and be competitive. Automatically, we are at the lowest level of the Mauritian society. Although education and health is free, most of us have no access to them because we have no means to accede to school and buy school materials (books, uniforms, lunch etc...) and we have no means to go to the hospital. Even when we manage to go to the hospital, we have no means to comply with what the doctor prescribes. Even when some of us manage to send the children to school, they cannot do well because half the required materials are lacking and they end up either failing their years or doing very poorly. So, it is a whole waste. Our life has become a waste. All of us are sad and to some extent depressed. Many of our elders have given up and have preferred to let themselves die because they knew they would never get to see their homes again.

All of our problems have been caused by the fact that we were removed. It has been established that although it was wrong to remove us from Diego Garcia, strictly speaking, they ought not to have removed us from the entire Chagos. The circumstances of our removal have scarred us for life; the conditions in which we have been living in Mauritius are due to the fact that we were never supposed to be here in the first place. We are not made for a life in Mauritius.

In 1998, through our two lawyers, Messrs S. Mardemootoo and R. Gifford, we initiated legal proceedings in London to challenge the English legislation of 1971 which denied us access to the Chagos, namely the BIOT Immigration Ordinance of 1971. The UK Government came up with all kinds of technical points to prevent us from succeeding: they said the English courts had no jurisdiction and that the BIOT Court had jurisdiction (in fact, there is no such thing as a BIOT Court); they also said we were time barred. On 03 November 2000, the High Court of London delivered a landmark ruling in our favour. The British government decided not to appeal. The BIOT Immigration Ordinance of 1971 was amended to allow us access to the islands.

In 2001, when some Chagossian fishermen tried to set foot on Peros Banhos, the BIOT Patrol Vessel quickly came and kicked them out, although they showed their BIOT Passports and the judgment. Ironically, in the lagoon of Peros Banhos, there were at least 15 yachts and sail boats, moored peacefully; their occupiers, all white sailors, were having a barbecue on the beach and playing volley-ball. Our lawyers had to protest about this degrading and unlawful treatment before the British authorities reviewed their policy.

In December 2001, on the strength of the November 2000 ruling, we lodged a claim against the UK Government for compensation, as a result of their wrongdoings and our sufferings. They raised two major technical points, namely that our claim was time barred and that since we had all signed a form of renunciation in 1982, we could not come back to court.

The truth is that in 1982, the British Government found out that we were all living in absolute poverty in Mauritius; it decided to grant us some relief by distributing cash for us to be relieved of some of our problems; each of us got about \$1500, which, for the most of it, unfortunately, went into the partial repayment of loans which the Chagossians had taken. The thing is that we were tricked into signing those forms when we collected our money. When we get medicine in the hospital, we are asked to give our thumbprint to acknowledge that we had received the medicines; when we retrieve registered mail at the post office, we are again asked to give our thumbprint to acknowledge that we had received the mail. We thought that by asking us the thumbprints, it was to acknowledge that we had received the money. Of course, we had no problem with this. The truth, unfortunately, is that it was far from just being an acknowledgment form: it was a form, drawn up in legal English, where we were renouncing to all of our rights as human beings against the UK Government. We totally ignored what we were doing. And we placed our thumbprint on the forms. A few may have known what they were doing, but they were so poor and so in need of money that, under duress, they would have signed almost anything.

The acts and doings of the English Government are violations of our human rights. The 1964 Mauritius Constitution which applied to the Chagos Islands gave us fundamental human rights, which can be easily taken from us. Moreover, there are a number of international treaties today prohibiting

CHAGOS REFUGEES GROUP

UPDATE

Legal proceedings

- In 1998, through our two lawyers, we initiated legal proceedings in London to challenge the British Indian Ocean Territory, (BIOT) Immigration Ordinance of 1971, which denied us access to the Chagos.
- On 03 November 2000, the High Court of London delivered a landmark ruling in our favour and the BIOT Immigration Ordinance of 1971 was amended to allow us access to the islands. But when some of us wanted to set foot on Peros Banhos in 2001 we were refused entry.
- The UK Government passed further legislation by a BIOT Order in Council on 10 June 2004 to interdict us, anew, access to the Chagos. We asked our lawyers to challenge this in Court.
- The hearing was held on 19 January 2006 at the High Court in London.
- On 11 May 2006, the High Court ruling gave the Chagossians the right to go back to our homeland.
- The British Government decided to appeal in July 2006.
- The appeal was heard in the High Court of London from 05 to 09 February 2007.
- On 23 May 2007 the Court of Appeal decided in favour of the Chagossians.
- Following this ruling the British Government appealed to the House of Lords for the last time.
- The hearing was held from 30 June-04 July 2008.
- The ruling of the House of Lords on 22 October 2008 gave a three-to-two majority against our right of return.

- Our next move is to seek relief under European Laws and continue their fight in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg and other international forums until justice is finally done.

Overseas Territories Inquiry

Mr. Richard Gifford (Solicitor for the Chagos islanders) and Mr. Olivier Bancoult gave oral evidence in public to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, London, in relation to its inquiry into the UK's Overseas Territories. This took place on Wednesday 23 January 2008.

It was a very positive meeting where the Foreign Affairs Committee was given a completely different perspective on Overseas Territories through our explanations about our forced exile, the terrible hardship and dreadful living conditions, our legal battle and wish to return to our homeland.

Restoration of graves on Peros Banhos and Salomon Islands

Following our last visit to the Chagos Archipelago in March/April 2006, we made a request to Mr. Tony Humphries, BIOT Administrator, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the British High Commission in Mauritius to have the graves of our ancestors restored as the cemeteries are in a very neglected state. We finally got a favourable reply at the beginning of the year 2008 and eight Chagossians flew to Singapore on 19 February 2008. They then caught a U.S. military flight to Diego Garcia. From there they travelled by Pacific Marlin, BIOT Patrol Fishing Vessel, to Peros Banhos and Salomon islands to clean up, mend and restore the graves. They spent about 7 days on each island.

Rendition Flights and Diego Garcia

Following the Foreign Secretary David Miliband's statement in Parliament on 21 February 2008 about two US "extraordinary rendition" flights that landed in Diego Garcia, we make these comments as a community that has been deported and is deeply interested in everything that pertains to Diego

Garcia, which is an integral part of our island home, the Chagos Archipelago.

Until now the British government has always denied playing a role in the flight system set up in secret by the CIA for the transport of terror suspects in third world countries.

David Miliband has now revealed to the House of Commons in London that all previous affirmations that no US rendition flights have landed in Diego Garcia needed to be corrected. This has in fact occurred twice. Indeed two US flights have transported terror suspects in UK airspace and landed in Diego Garcia twice in 2002.

The Chagossian community had suspicions about this from certain sources but each time it was denied when we asked for explanations. At the Foreign Affairs Committee on 23 January 2008 in London one member declared that there has been a great deal of speculation and reports in the media that Diego Garcia might be being used for extraordinary rendition. He asked if we had any evidence of this. We said that we heard about it but we did not have any proof. Now the proof has finally been produced.

1. We deeply regret that Diego Garcia has been used as a place where terror suspects have been transported while we are not free to go there. We strongly request that there be no more renditions through Diego Garcia.
2. We believe the time has come for the British government to follow the example of the Australian Prime Minister who apologized to the Aborigines. They should now take responsibility for past actions and apologize to the Chagossian community for the deportation of an entire people and the refusal to recognize their right to return, which the English courts have described as unlawful, repugnant and an abuse of power.

The British government has often acted in secrecy - for example, over our deportation. We hope that this will be no more.

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inhumane and degrading treatments, racial discrimination, genocide and deprivation of homeland property, but yet, the UK and US violated all of these treaties in treating us the way they did. These violations are still going on, as we remain in exile in Mauritius, still living in abject poverty.

To make matters worse, the UK Government found it necessary to pass further legislation on the 10 June 2004 to interdict us, anew, access to the Chagos. This time, they went by an Order in Council to do it. We have asked our lawyers to challenge this in Court.

This latest move is another example of the unethical, unlawful and inhumane British attitude. They pretend that our islands are going to be submerged soon by the rising water level and that it is not possible to settle back there; they also say that there is frequent seismic activities there which make it impossible for us to live there. Yet, we do not see any U.S soldier leaving Diego Garcia. On the contrary, the U.S Government is investing another \$100 million in infrastructure and is bringing more soldiers in.

The U.S is also refusing to compensate us. We lodged a class action claiming compensation before a U.S Court in Washington D.C. The U.S Government's defence has been that according to U.S laws, foreigners cannot sue the U.S Government for damages, no matter what the U.S Government has done to them. They sign international treaties protecting human rights and when we say they violate these very treaties, they raise technical points to deny us justice.

We will now seek relief under European Laws. We feel that as British Citizens, we are also European Citizens and are entitled to protection under European human rights laws.

The UK and the US governments have taken us and are taking us for a big ride. They go to Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq to put an end to violation of human rights; yet, they are violating human rights in their own backyard.
