

Claim No. HQ02X01287

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE

QUEEN'S BENCH DIVISION

B E T W E E N:

THE CHAGOS ISLANDERS

Claimants

-and-

(1) THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
(2) HER MAJESTY'S BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY
COMMISSIONER

Defendants

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
MARIE LISETTE TALATE**

I, MARIE LISETTE TALATE, of Route Royal, Terrason, Pointe Aux Sables, Mauritius, will say as follows:-

1. I was born on Diego Garcia, Chagos Islands, on 19 March 1941 and am one of the Claimants in the Chagos Islanders Group Litigation ; I have been asked to tell about my life in the Chagos, the circumstances of my removal therefrom and my life in Mauritius since I arrived here, where facts hereafter set out relate to my personal history, they are within my own knowledge. In respect of

matters affecting our community, I have relied on information given to me which I believe to be true.

MY LIFE IN THE CHAGOS

Education

2. My ancestors have been on the Chagos Islands since 1830's. Our parents educated us with the basics in life until school was brought in under Mauritian and British administration. As I remember it, Sir Robert Scott, the then Governor of Mauritius, introduced education in our Chagos in early 1950s. There was a school on Diego Garcia, where I was born and where I lived until I was forced to leave in 1971. The schools 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 and stress at school, like in Mauritius. My children Luc, Lucia, Ileen and John went to school because there were things that they had to learn, such as how to speak and write. They also learned basic Mathematics, but nothing like what they teach at school in Mauritius. My children used to love school and it was always a pleasure for all of us to see them go to class ; when we compare it with what we see today at those school that 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 looked upon as being second-class citizens because they come from the Chagos ; they are laughed at and teased by Mauritian children and schools therefore very often turns out to be a nightmare for the Chagossian child, unless he does not disclose his place of origin. This is so because everybody knows that we are the poorest on the island, hence the least fun to be around. We were always proud of our origin and at first we never refused to disclose anything, although we suffered terribly from that. Then, gradually, I learnt from my children and grand-children that it was easier for them to conceal that they came from the 'outer islands', although they often got caught out at school because of their Chagossian accent.

3. Only Chagossians who were children in the late 1950s got an education ; none of us adults went to school or had a formal education. We were of course educated by our parents on the values of life and as far as we are concerned, that was plenty of education for us. With that, I lived happily and simply on my islands. I did not really need to learn the things that are taught at school because I had a different life there. Of course, the education I got from my parents was well suited to life in the Chagos ; it was not appropriate for life in Mauritius, which country, by the time I was driven there, was already a developing country, with its own economy. Mauritius was fine for us for medical treatment or for short holidays; it was not appropriate for us to live there. That is why my family and I suffered terribly afterwards.

Employment

4. 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 thirty-two different types of work, including to fishing, babysitting, working as maids, constructing buildings mechanical and boat building, or work with copra. Most of us has different jobs during a day.
5. Women, like myself, 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 and the Seychelles.
6. 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 were responsible for peace and order (e.g. the 'commandeurs') and were like policemen. The vast majority, however, were involved with copra, fishing, construction, carpentry and steel work mechanical and boat building 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. It always was a community thing : those who would fish would always fish for everyone and in that sense, there was a great community life and spirit.

7. I never had a written contract of employment. Chagossians born on Chagos were not required to have one. I do not know any native Chagossians to have signed any contract of employment on Chagos; I have heard of the existence of such contracts but they only existed for signature abroad and for those temporary contract workers from the Seychelles and from Mauritius who came to the Chagos.. some times it seems, that native Chagossians who visited Mauritius were required to sign them before returning home, by the shipping agents in Mauritius, but no one knew why, and the reason was not explained. I never left Chagos to visit Mauritius until my final deportation.

8. 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. Of course, Chagos was no exception to the reality that in all communities, you have one or two 'outlaws'; they were, however, properly dealt with.

9. In addition to the usual salary, all of us 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 cash economy there. Like other workers, I also 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. When I say 'sell', I mean 'barter'. We did not literally sell among ourselves; we only exchanged things. We only bought at the shop ; even then, the administrator, who was the usual employer, would open accounts for us there and whatever we would get from the shop would be deducted from our accounts, based on our salary. We never therefore handled cash or money; if we ever did, it was extremely rare and mostly when we were

in Mauritius. Even then, I had great difficulty in handling cash and if we would not be in the presence of a Mauritian friend, we were often cheated by Mauritians whenever we went there for medical treatment or holidays.

Social life in the Chagos:

10. Far from the hectic and consuming life of Mauritius, my family and I led a very peaceful life on our small islands.
11. There was no mad rush, we all lived according to our own rhythm, neither 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 was no poverty and no misery.
12. My children and myself 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 contentment 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-fowl, 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 fish whenever they needed fish or if they just felt like it. We had the best fish, lobster, octopus and crab. We always had fresh fish, most often red snappers and 'babonne' which is sold at over \$25 a pound in Mauritius 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, is inferior and often not available. It is not that there is no fish in Mauritius, but on an island of 1.1 million inhabitants, the lagoons having been emptied of its fish, and fishermen need to be well organised to go outside the lagoons. This makes the fish much

more expensive and not available to poor people like ourselves. it was a staple for us.

13. We had and lived a life which 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 (many similar words), 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 miss the drinks we manufacture on our own, from natural liquor and rhum : 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 'balle rende 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.

14. We were a very religious community. Most of us were and still are Christians ; we went to church in Pointe de l'Est and attended mass every Sunday and always maintained faith in God. For 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.

15. We regularly tended, as Christians, the graves of our deceased ones. I remember that I used to visit the cemetery at least once a month and bring fresh flowers with me to put on the graves of my ancestors. It has now been over thirty years that we have been denied this custom.
16. The Registers of Birth, Deaths and Marriages were maintained on the Islands by the Plantation Managers. Marriages were celebrated in the church generally by a visiting Priest. Children were born with the attendance of a midwife, at the Medical Centre. No one who took the trouble to study these official records could have been in any doubt as to the true nature of our long-settled community, which stretched over several generations.

Health

17. The food we ate, the work we did and the life we lived kept us very healthy. Diabetes, hyper tension and cardiovascular diseases were rare 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 for medical treatment and then come back.
18. There is virtually no pollution on the islands, and the climate is benign.
19. In Mauritius, because of the pollution to which our children are exposed, they are sick often. We are the poorest of Mauritius, so we live the worst areas of the country and in the most polluted areas . In Chagos, it was different.
20. In Mauritius, where we live, there is no hygiene : we often live amongst discarded rubbish, so we cannot expect to live healthily. Our children often play in rubbish, with sick dogs around, in areas where there is 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

21. We all lived in individual homes on the Chagos Islands. Each family had its own house and its own land, so my husband and I had our own house, yard and garden, big enough for all of us, including our children to live in comfortably.
22. There were seven of us living in our house on Diego Garcia, namely my husband John La Rue, my sons Luc, Joelyss and Jocelyn as well as my daughters Lucia and Ileen.
23. We were all regarded as owners of our plot of land and of our house.
24. When one of us became of age, he chose a plot of land in a residential area, then informed the administrator that he was taking that land and he would then build his house on it.
25. We had to inform the administrator because that was the only way he could know which land was occupied by whom, since there was no official register of properties in the Chagos. But there was never a problem about property ; once one of us took a plot, it became publicly known that this was his land and house and everybody respected other's property rights. Once we chose the land and built our house, we would generally have a vegetable and fruit garden ; we would also use open space to rear animals. There was a sense of freedom to see chickens, guinea fowls and turkeys everywhere; when we look back at this now, it reminds us of how agreeable were our living conditions on Chagos.
26. I have fond memories of my house and my yard; I spent a lot of time decorating and improving my house, like other women on the Chagos, while my husband spent a lot of time in the garden growing vegetables, fishing and rearing poultry.

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 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 or made in a more traditional style with thatched roofs or in timber with branches and coconut leaves.

28. The land that we lived on and where we built our houses was free, private and available land.
29. We all occupied our individual land and houses, publicly, as owners. We occupied our land and house as our own property and the whole community knew which land and which house belonged to whom; it was an apparent occupation in that all of us knew whose house belonged to whom. Even to this day, if we were to go back to the Chagos to see our houses, we would be able to identify with precision which house belongs to whom, provided the houses are still there and have not been destroyed.
30. We lived on our property continuously, without interruption, peacefully, publicly, without challenge as owners.
31. Besides our homes and land, we had personal property, which included amongst other things, our house furniture, personal belongings, clothes, utensils, dishes, silverware, animals that we reared for consumption and our domestic animals (pets).
32. When we were forcefully removed, we lost all these. We lost our immovable and movable properties; we lost our lifetime jobs, our peace of mind, our happiness, our dignity and we lost our culture and personal identity.

MY FORCED REMOVAL FROM THE CHAGOS

33. In the early 1960s, I had no reason to believe any misfortune was about to would happen because we were living a normal and peaceful life on our islands. The peaceful order of our lives is shown in a Colonial Office film entitled "Peaks of Limuria" shot at the time of Governor Scott's visit in the 1950's,

which I recall – in fact, I am featured in the film itself. I identify myself as the woman hanging washing on a line in the garden of my home.

34. After 1964, we became aware of visits by British and US officials. We wondered why they were inspecting the Island but no one told us that anything was afoot.
35. The British and American officials saw us, our community, our settlements and saw how we lived a happy and peaceful life. I personally recollect having often received the visits of U.S naval vessels in Diego Garcia. They would moor outside the islands and come on land by small boats. They were always nice to us and in turn we always greeted them well. When the Americans visited us, we greeted them very warmly and offered them the best things we had in order to make them enjoy their stay with us. They were always accompanied by British officials. Of course we knew nothing of their purpose since they did not discuss this with us.
36. Even after I had learnt what was then being planned for our homeland, I do not know why we were never consulted, or any attempt made us see what measures could be adopted to mitigate the effect of uprooting us from our homeland. I have four generations of ancestors who have been born on the Chagos and there are many Chagossians that I know who have similar status, some with two or three generations. Accordingly, we could never, realistically be regarded as migrant workers. It is true that there were some labourers or administrators who were brought in from the Seychelles as additional workforce or specific skilled worker on the islands, but they normally came to the islands for a period of 6 months at a time. It was our habit to travel to Mauritius for medical treatment and for holidays. Mauritius and Seychelles were the only destinations for us to visit.
37. Ships would regularly come from Mauritius and the Seychelles. The MV Mauritius used to come twice a year; the otherships would come every three months ; every now and then, there would be another ship coming from Mauritius. But all this slowed down drastically after 1967. Ships stopped

coming from Mauritius ; we started getting things from the Seychelles but it was not enough and supplies were of poor quality, compared to those we had been receiving from Mauritius.

38. Soon we noticed that ships were coming less frequently with the supplies which were needed, notably milk, dairy products and sugar to the Chagos Islands. Then, some time later, shipments of salt and rice became less frequent. Rice did not stop at one go : first dirty and of bad quality then stopped altogether. What was very worrying was that the ships would come empty, and take away what we were exporting from the Chagos, namely copra and fish products.
39. Because of this interruption of supplies after 1965, my younger children did not grow up on milk. Instead they were fed with coconut water ; this was heart breaking for me and other mothers. But we could we do nothing..
40. Similarly, we no longer had tea, flour, sugar, oil, or rice. For several weeks, I cooked food at home without oil and I fed my family without rice and without bread or other flour-based food. How we coped without these things, I do not know, but we did it and it was very difficult. When I enquired about the reasons for these shortages, I was told by Mr. Moulinie that the British Government had sold the islands to the Americans and that they wanted us to leave.
41. The nurses and the school teacher left Diego Garcia and did not return. The Priest departed too. I still remember that the last nurses, namely Mrs. Rivalland and Ms. Jenny were upset when they had to leave us. Our life was becoming precarious, but no one came forward to explain what was happening and what our future would be. We became alarmed that some families who left for the usual visit to Mauritius did not return. It seemed that they had decided not to return to D.G. but why did they not tell their friends or relatives before leaving? For some years this uncertainty in our lives continued.

42. I had many friends who had left the Chagos for Mauritius for medical treatment or on holidays and whom I never saw again in the Chagos. They later told me that they went to book a return passage with Rogers & Co, the shipping agents at Rogers house to buy their return tickets. They were told that the Islands had been sold to the Americans and they could not board the ship to go back. They had pleaded that members of their family had been left on Chagos, that their personal belongings and properties were their and that Chagos was their homeland. These pleas were brushed aside. The Islands had been sold by the British to the Americans and there were no ships to take them home to Chagos, was the firm response to all.
43. To those like me who remained on Chagos the return of empty ships seemed strange. Why were the families who had left for visits not returned on those ships? No one gave us an answer. Meanwhile, all their belongings remained on the islands and their homes fell vacant. There was of course no telephone contact with Mauritius available to us, and the ships stopped bringing mail.

Removal from the Chagos

44. I was, with my family, among those who were forced to leave the islands.

By 1970 or 1971, we noticed that British officers began to visit the islands more regularly than they used to ; then, the Americans started to arrive. It . that our Chagos days were running out, although we were not told when.

45. I had noticed that the attitudes of the British officers and American soldiers were significantly different from the ones who visited us before. The new faces were a lot tougher and meaner. Clearly, there was an attitude that they were here to stay and made us feel out of place.

46. I remember that we were told we were going to be bombed if we did not leave the islands ; the British officers said that the entire place was to become a military facility, with fighter jets and helicopters and these engines would eventually kill us. In fact, I remember that they did send a helicopter and an airplane to fly very low to scare us and the scene is still fresh in my mind : all of us, men, women and children were running for our lives and hid in our houses.
47. We certainly thought they would bomb us. Our children were always frightened after these scary episodes and we could not offer them any re-assurance because we were always scared ourselves.
48. Then one day, during 1971, those of us from Diego Garcia were asked to attend 'an important meeting' to be held in front of the plantation manager's house on the following morning. I attended with a few hundred Chagossians. There were American and British officials there. Mr. Moulinie was also there, but he was only translating the orders that were being given by the British officer, who was one Mr. Todd. 'You all have to leave the island. You have no choice. The Americans are coming and we do not want you here.', Mr. Todd said. He also promised that there would be homes and jobs waiting for us on arrival in Mauritius and large compensation.
49. I have been shown some photographs of the gathering, which are attached to a Witness Statement of S S Mandary, and confirm that this is the meeting to which I refer.
50. We had heard rumours about this before, but this seemed final. 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. We still remember that a Chagossian, Marie Louina, died of what must have been a heart attack upon hearing that we had to leave. She just collapsed and died. On the spot. We rushed to her, but it was too late. When I look back at all this now, I sometimes wish I too had died at that moment.

51. I did not want to leave Diego Garcia at all. I wanted to stay there and end my days.
52. The British officers had decided that those of us who lived in Diego Garcia would move to 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. 'Diego Garcia has been sold', they said. 'You all will move to Peros Banhos and Salomon. We do not want anybody here'.
53. Some of us were threatened by the British officers and told they had no choice but to leave the island. Others were told that in Mauritius, there would be a house, a land, employment and plenty of better things waiting for us.
54. After meeting, nothing happened for around six months. There were almost no provisions on the island because the ships had stopped bringing them and we had only what the islands could produce. The nurses, namely Mrs. Marc, Mrs. Rivalland, Miss Jenny and Mrs. Prosper had all gone back to Mauritius and Seychelles and there was no medication on the islands.
55. Just before we left the island, we were ordered to bring our dogs to the 'calorifer' (a big building). So, my sons and I brought our dogs. We thought they were going to be identified or weighed for the trip to Mauritius. Once there, our dogs, many in total, were forced into the calorifer. The British officers had placed poisoned meat and meat balls inside the 'calorifer' to attract the dogs in. All doors and windows were then closed, locking the dogs in the building. We were told to go away but most of us stayed to see what were they doing to our animals. We then saw two military 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, desperately, to convince the officers to let them out, but in vain. There were soldiers around. Pretty soon, we heard the dogs starting to cry, then scream painfully. We thought the British would have respected our pets but on the orders of BIOT they were taken from us and destroyed in a needless act of cruelty.

56. The day finally came that we had to board the ship. It was sometime around August 1971. I do not remember the exact date.
57. I did not want to go. Neither did my children. We were 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. Life in Peros Banhos and Salomon was different from life in Diego Garcia. We were emotionally very attached to Diego Garcia and we were clearly not going to be returned there. My great great grand parents are from Diego Garcia and all of us who have descended from them have been born there. I wanted to live the rest of my life on Diego Garcia and be buried next to my ancestors.
58. All of my children, my husband, my mother Julia Both Jeanne and myself were on the boat. My children, my mother and I cried the whole time we were boarding ; we knew we would never come back and for us, this was a disaster.
59. I knew most of the other people who were on the boat. I still remember that the Imb  Family (Marie, Julia, Marinna and G r ard), the Gaspard Family (Sylvie, Noelline and Marie Brunette), the Ono Family (Edouard, Marie and Anselme together with their eight children, Franco, Marcel), the Marcelin Family (Ren , Brigitte, Marie Ange, Yvon), the Volfrin Family (Andr , Corrine and Pacquerette), Michel and Laurence Esaie, the Thomas Family (Anolia, Jeanine, Stellio, Marcelino and Lucie), Bernard and Bernadette Lutchimounien, the Boucari Family (Edouard, Louis, Philip, Jeffrey), the Baptiste Family (Villiers, Mamode, Michel, Haroul, Sylvie, Laval, Bernicia), the Pauline Family (Liline, Josiane, Regina, Ivy, Steven, Robinson) were all on the boat with us. The boat

was overcrowded But it seemed that little thought has been given to our comfort.

60. The ships were scheduled to set sail after sunset. This was very unusual. In fact, this had never happened before. Ships always depart during the day. Once on board, we learnt from one of the crew members 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.
61. It was a terribly painful scene for all of us who were in that situation. Some of the dogs which we had not been able to bring to the calorifer had followed the ship, on the beach, as it was moving parallel to the island. The dogs were distressed
62. From Diego Garcia, we went to Peros Banhos. Mr. Todd, through Mr, Moulinie, had told us that unlike Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon Island were not sold and that we could move there. The MV Nordvaer brought us to Peros Banhos. That same boat was supposed to go back to Diego Garcia and get further human cargo but it encountered some mechanical problems and had to go to the Seychelles for repairs. They switched boat in the Seychelles and they returned with the 'La Perle', also known as the Isle of Farquhar. That boat, on its way to Diego Garcia, stopped at Peros Banhos to collect the mother of our friend Rosemond Saminaden, who being very sick, had obtained the military's consent to be examined by the military doctor on Diego Garcia.
63. The Isle of Farquhar then went to Diego Garcia and brought back the last shipment of people : I remember well that Raphael Louis, Raymond Mein, Marcel and Anselme Ono as well as the Deputy Administrator Prosper were on that boat.
64. I lived there for a while, with my family until sometime around November 1972 when we were forced to board the ship to Mauritius. For us natives of Diego

Garcia, it was not the same life as in our Diego ; we kept hope that Diego Garcia would be re-open to us one day, but it never did.

65. Again, all of us were shocked. We had no idea that we would have to leave Peros Banhos too ; we knew that Salomon Island had closed down and its inhabitants were forced out and moved to Peros Banhos. The Administrator of Salomon Island, Mr. Maxime Doffay, had come over to replace Jean Guillemin the Administrator of Peros Banhos and announced the Salomon Island as well as Peros Bañhos had been sold to the Americans. That was around October 1972. We were told that we did not have much time and that the ship was going to come and get us in a month.
66. We then suffered again what we had lived through before, making another removal from the island. This time, we witnessed our friends and family, natives of Peros Banhos, go through what we went through when we were removed from Diego. It was similarly painful for us, because once more, we were finally leaving the Chagos and there was no hope, , of us returning to Diego.
67. I have recently watched a film (on national television at a friend's place) called 'Roots', based on a story written by Alex Haley. In that film, one can see African people being shipped to America to work as slaves. We were transported just like that, in no better conditions. It shocked me to see that on television and I showed my grand children how we all were brought to Mauritius. That brought nightmare souvenirs and tears back ; that movie was supposed to relate what happened during the slave trade, two to three centuries back. Yet, we lived the whole thing only 30 years ago. Just as in that film, we were out on the deck, in the rain and in the sun, for days and days ; we were also crammed together, like sardines.
68. We were forced on ships which were good and appropriate only for animals, copra and other exports but definitely not for passengers. There were around 150 of us in that ship, when it seemed suitable to carry only 40 to 50. In fact, the boat which carried us from Peros Banhos was "Isle of Farquhar", also known as 'La Perle', under the command of Captain Savy; it seemed to float very low in

the water. I was later told it was beyond insurance. Travel conditions were extremely bad; It was a 2500 miles ordeal to Mauritius and the ship had to stop in Seychelles, which in fact increased the distance. Many were crammed in the lower deck and upper deck. There were several dozen in the lower hold of 50 square feet. There was no proper bedding; They slept on the metal floor of the ship. There was no room for them to move and walk around. They slept crammed together on the floor and there were no toilet facilities so they were obliged to urinate and defacate on the spot and in front of others. People were vomiting on the floor, children were crying and there was no ventilation. The ship was so overloaded and the vessel so low in the water that the port holes could not be opened. The stench was nauseating and the journey lasted for several days. It was hell.

69. Some of us were confined on the open deck. That was not much easier than the lower deck. We were there in the sun and in the rain, in the day and at night. When it rained, we got very cold and some of us got very sick. But there were no rooms for us in the lower deck. In one room there were other Chagossians impossibly crammed; in the other room, there were the plantation manager's horses. It was not clear why room had to be made for horses in preference to passengers, but, inexplicably, instructions had been given to carry the horses delicately and to take good care of them, meaning that we had to make room for the horses and spend the whole of the trip in open air. We were made to feel inferior to the animals. : furthermore, they were retired old horses which simply belonged to the plantation's managers, who had been instructed by the British authorities to have the horses 'handled with care' during the trip. The horses were fed grass, but there was no proper food for the passengers throughout the 4 or 5 day passage.
70. There were many of us who got sick on board. Two of my children fell very ill and almost died.
71. Many of us were desperate and terribly depressed. Some Chagossians even committed suicide and threw themselves out to sea. I 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 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, a foreign land and country ; he threw himself in the high seas and disappeared in front of our eyes. That was incredible and I still remember this as if it happened yesterday. He disappeared as soon as he jumped.

72. Our journey was broken when we had to stop in Seychelles. Likewise, the three other trips which the boat made to get people from Peros Banhos to Mauritius up to mid 1973 were in the same circumstances, I have been told. I have been shown the copy of the certificate of birth of George Desir who was actually born whilst the M.V. Nordvaer was in harbour at Port Victoria, Mahe, Seychelles on Saturday 2 June 1973. That vessel had by then been repaired and was helping in getting people out of Peros Banhos, but I travelled on AMV Farquar, much earlier, in November 1972.
73. When we stopped there, we were forced to remain locked in the deck. We could not go to the upper deck except with the permission of the policemen, which was rarely granted. I have been told that many Chagossians who were on the later trips and whose vessel were likewise stopping in the Seychelles were actually taken ashore but since there was no accommodation, instead they were detained in prison during the time the ship was there. They were released only when the ship was ready to set sail, about one week after they had arrived in Seychelles. None of them had committed any crime. They were placed there because they had no other place to keep them but yet, they were locked up I was told this information by several of my friends who actually went through this experience, namely Rita Ono, Robert Imouche, Sessen Imbé, Joseph Jean-François, Michel Vencatassin,. All of them told me they were locked up in prison with their families. They also had told me that the prisons were old and dirty and that it was so old that prisoners had been shifted to another new prison and no longer stayed there. They told me that they were heavily guarded, with policemen watching over them continuously.

74. I refer also to a document provided by my solicitors drawn from official sources which refer to our incarceration for two or three weeks on the prison at Seychelles. We complained to the British officials who were supervising the operations in the Seychelles, in vain. The BIOT representative stated that since there was no place to keep us during the transit, prison was the only shelter he could offer. However, he could not explain or justify the need for us to be locked in. I do not agree that we were free to come and go since we were locked up. I deny that there were no complaints. Although we asked for our complaints to be passed to the British Governor in Seychelles, there was no response. This seemed typical of the sense of responsibility of the BIOT Administration.

They seemed to feel no obligation to explain why we were brought treated in this inhumane way, and confidently gave as reasons that "the Americans have taken Diego"; or simply that decisions had been made and we should not ask to know why. They seemed to act with confidence, indeed arrogance, leaving us bewildered as to how they felt entitled to treat us with such contempt. Least of all was there the slightest hint that they were acting illegally or that we had rights that were deserving of respect. I do not recall that Chagossians realised they were British citizens, and no BIOT official ever explained our status to us. I am certain that if any Chagossian had been asked what rights he had, he would have laughed bitterly and said that BIOT can do this to us, right or wrong.

My Life in Mauritius:

75. When we reached Mauritius, our nightmare continued.

76. The British authorities had not made any effective arrangements for us to be received or directed towards places where we could be lodged. There was no one on the quay to receive us or verify our safe arrival. We were left entirely on our own. Mauritius had become independent in 1968 and the capital was becoming a major trading city of the Indian Ocean without jobs or homes we had no chance of surviving.

77. 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. Children were upset, to see the state in which their parents were. My family and I remained on the boat for a couple days, as we had no where else to go.
78. I remember that for the majority of us who had never travelled to Mauritius before, they were frightened by the sight of the silos in the harbour these were modern 'calorifiers', meant to burn them, like the place where the dogs had died on Diego.
79. Most of us were very sick from the trip. Some had died during the trip ; others a few days after we reached Mauritius.
80. Two of my children, Joelyss and Regis (who was born during the time I was living on Peros Banhos, (after having been removed from Diego Garcia), died out of malnutrition two months after landing in Mauritius. Both of them died within eight days. I believe they were weakened by the shortage of supplies following their birth and had become dehydrated or starved during the dreadful crossing when no proper food was offered to us.
81. The captain himself told us that we could stay on the boat if we wanted. He was himself very disturbed at our plight and was near to tears.
82. It was a mess. The ship was being unloaded with animals, copra etc the deck was still foul with vomit, excrement and urine. Children were crying, we were crying ; our personal belongings were scattered all over the quay ; we were lost. Some of us were just laying on the dock ; others were still on the deck. It was comparable to a war scene.
83. We had no alternative but to beg for shelter. Some of us begged refuge at the place of people who were also asked to provide employment; 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.

84. Life for us gradually settled. Most of us found vacant State land and erected poor wooden structures thereon, with rusty tin roofs which we would find abandoned. I refer to the photographs taken in November 1978 of some of these structures, and the film "World in Action" shot in 1982, featuring some of the same. 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.
85. After some days in Mauritius, we had to go and find work. There are no copra plantations in Mauritius, and many have no experience in the very much more challenging sugar plantation. Many women found jobs as maid servants while men tried to find jobs as janitors, watchmen or stonemasons. This was difficult because the Mauritian Creole was always likely to be favoured over the Chagossian men, who, because they came from the 'outer islands' were considered to be foreigners and inferior.
86. 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 thrown out of our homeland. In their mind, we were 'rejected' and 'kicked' out of our own land ; hence we were the lowest of the low and the poorest of the poor. We then became the lowest class of the Mauritian society and we very quickly got to know what that really meant.
87. When we went to 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 maid servants would be asked to be responsible of 'pottes' of our 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 empty their pots themselves when they get up in the morning. But since we were Chagossians, none of the Mauritians hesitated to confer to us that specific duty. It was very degrading. It quickly became known that Chagossians maid servants could not object to that additional duty for fear of losing the job.

88. We were always treated as inferiors. 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. We would not be invited to social gatherings or weddings. 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 began to lose our communal identity. We eventually lost all trust in ourselves and our children grew up feeling the same way. We did not know where we belonged , who were we and what would become of us.
89. Many of us who worked as maids begged for food from our employers. We would then be given old bread (2 to 3 days old) and which would have been otherwise thrown away. If we were lucky, we would be given some left over which had been kept for many days and which our employers would not eat anymore.
90. At home, we cooked the stale scraps of bread in water, salt and leaves and fed our children and ourselves with it. Many of us would get up at 2.00 a.m to go and steal mangoes and other fruits in the street of Port-Louis, before the owners got up. We would collect windfalls that were often rotten..
91. We have experienced daily discrimination against us at the hands of the British, Mauritians or Americans. The fact that we are Chagossian prevents us from being employed in Diego Garcia because the Americans do not want any of us there. It is very easy to establish this discrimination : despite the many Chagossians who have applied for jobs there, not one has actually obtained a job there. We have had to struggle all through our life against discrimination and it is still persisting today.

92. We have kept the British officials aware of all this from time to time. Many of us have written letters of complaint to the British High Commission in Port-Louis ; others have written directly to Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II. I do not know how to write, so others like me have demonstrated our pains and miseries by protests in the streets of Port-Louis or in front of the British High Commission on several occasions. We were always ignored by the British diplomats and officials. We had become frustrated that even after the High Court had ruled our expulsion unlawful, nothing had been done to alleviate our sufferings or provide for our return. About 500 of us camped out in the streets outside the British High Commission in Port Louis in support of some demands for some limited forms of compensation and the right to return to Chagos. The last protest I participated in was in November 2001 ; the British High Commissioner ignored us and although we camped out day and night for two weeks in front of the High Commission, he did not enquire what we wanted or propose his good offices. The indifference of the British authorities to our problems confirmed our feelings of frustration and despair.
93. Many Chagossians have been living in shacks. Mauritius is a tropical island ; whenever it rains, our roofs, made up most often of rusty tin sheets, leak abundantly and flood our shelter, wet our beds and destroyed whatever we had. And when there are cyclones, it is a nightmare. In 1975, we had the cyclone 'Gervaise' and in 1981 we were visited by the cyclone 'Claudette'. Almost all Chagossians lost their houses (shacks) and all their belongings in these two cyclones. During those cyclones, having lost our houses, we 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.
94. We live and have always lived in the worst areas of Mauritius, where there is no sewage or drainage and where it is infested with mosquitoes and other infectious bugs and animals such as cockroaches and rats. We are always the first ones to carry sickness around and our children were always infected with viruses, flues, malarias, gastros etc... which are caused by living in these areas and in the conditions that we have. This has not changed over the thirty years of

exile in Mauritius and most of us still live in abject poverty and in the poorest and dirtiest areas of Mauritius.

95. With that kind of lives, it is not surprising that most of our children did not and do not have the chance to get proper education. Although education is free in Mauritius, we had and have no money to buy copybooks, plates, pens and pencils, books and other necessary educational items such as uniforms which is compulsory in Mauritius ; worst, most of us had and have no money for transport for them to go to school. Those who lived and live near a school (say a couple miles away) were and are lucky because at least they could walk. Others could not do anything about it. Many children stayed home and this had led to some children becoming delinquents and subject to drug addiction, prostitution and other illegal activities. Some of them have became robbers, and are currently in jail Many of our children cannot go to school because we have no financial means. Education is still free ; it is even compulsory, if we have no money to send them on the bus, we cannot send them to school. In Mauritius, we do not have a 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 can not do their homework (which is because they do not have the books). Sometime, by the treatment they get at school for not being able to keep up with the rest of the classes (having no books, no copy books, no uniforms, no pens etc ...), they prefer to stay home to avoid the embarrassment of being humiliated in front of the classroom.
96. 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 chose 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. Epidemics of Hepatitis A occurs about every two years in our community. All this because we do not have hygienic conditions.

97. On average, the houses that we live in are very small. Most of us live in fragile wooden shacks, with rusty tin sheets. There are some of us who live in small concrete houses. The Mauritian government gave to some of us small concrete houses in or about 1982 ; but since most of us were very poor and heavily indebted, there was no alternative but to immediately sell these houses and return to our shacks. A few lucky ones managed to keep these concrete houses, but even then, we do not have more than two rooms in them.

98. For most of us, we have two rooms per house. We can barely live like that because most of us have more than eight persons living under one roof. There is unwanted intimacy but no privacy in our lives ; our young girls have to always share rooms with others, most of the time not of the same sex ; couples have to share room with other members of the family and normal family life is impossible. Since our removal from Chagos, I cannot put my children to bed in their own room ; nor can I share a bedroom with my husband in privacy.

99. Today, I have 14 people living under my roof, namely Ileen and her children Marie Noelle, Regis, Cindy, Jean Noel ; Lucia and her children Stephanie and Jean Alain, Jocelyn, one of my grandsons Michael, my sister Noeline Paul and Ange Lamb.

100. For some of us, it is even worse : the Jacques Family has 15 persons under its roof in a house of 2 bedrooms (Exhibit DS46), the Volfrin Family has 20 persons under its roof in a house of 2 bedrooms (Exhibit DS73).

101. It is not by choice that we live like that, but it is because those additional members of our family have nowhere else to go and are dependent upon each other.

102. For more than 20 years, I did not have electricity and water supplies. Compared to the average family in Mauritius, we do not have electric light in the house, a TV set, or music system, and can not iron our clothes. We have no refrigerator & freezer, no microwave and oven, no hair dryer etc ... We still cook on wood. During the time we had no water supplies, we were collecting water to drink

and cook from the river ; some families are still in that position : the Jacques Family, from Grand River North West, still collects water at the river for their own consumption (Exhibit DS66). The colour of the water confirms that it is not clean water, yet, this is the only water that is available to them. When we were on Chagos, we had an abundant supply for fresh water from rainwater collection but this is not practised in Mauritius and suitable equipment is not available.

103. My sanitary facilities, like those of most Chagossians consist of a hole dug in the ground. It is a simple sump with no drainage, treatment facility or removable chamber. It is covered with a tin sheet. Whenever we need to use it, we simply lift the sheet. There is therefore always very bad smell around our house and when it rains, it becomes very unhygienic, because it overflows, mixes with floodwater and spreads around.

104. Like most of us, I receive a total income of around Rs.3,000. Some receive less than this and some of us receive slightly more. I find it impossible to live with this sum ; it is barely enough for an individual, let alone for those like me who have over 10 dependants. Many of the dependants are young children who are legally too young to be employed. We also have dependants who are senior citizens who cannot work any longer or who are physically impaired.

105. I know Chagossian families with no income at all.

106. I have suffered from severe depression for a long time. Although depression 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. I have been personally depressed throughout most of my life in Mauritius and I am still depressed.

107. Like many of us, I am prone to falling sick with flu, fever or some other infections and many of us are asthmatic. These illness are related to our conditions of life and the way we live. Yet, we were healthy in the Chagos. We ate very well and we always ate and consumed fresh produce. We lived in very hygienic conditions. Here, we have lost all this.

108. My family and I 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, we have little access to them because we cannot afford the cost of travel to school or to buy school materials (books, uniforms, lunch etc...). Even when we manage to go to the hospital, we cannot afford to pay for what the doctor prescribes. Even when in the past I have managed to send the children to school, they could not do well because of inadequate study, materials and they end up either failing their exams 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. It is quite common for Chagossians to die in their 50's or 60's as what is regarded as a broken heart.

109 All of these problems have been caused by the fact that we were removed. 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 are accustomed to an entirely different style of life. We are not made for a life in Mauritius.

Our Knowledge of our Legal Rights

110. Since our arrival in Mauritius, we have had no practical means of access to English Legal Advice on our position. No advice or information on our plight has ever been offered by the British representatives in Mauritius. I know the late Michel Vencatassen and am aware that he brought a claim for compensation against the British Government. However, no information on any illegal acts by the British Government was ever given to us a result, and so far

as I am aware, the British Government never admitted responsibility or apologised for the sufferings inflicted on us. At this time no official or lawyer ever explained that we had a legal right to return to Chagos or that fundamental rights had been abused. Nonetheless, we all felt very strongly that we must return to Chagos one day and made our feelings of attachment very clear whenever we were asked.

111. Until 1999 we were never advised of our rights, nor of the responsibility of the British authorities. They never admitted they had caused the destruction of our society and we did not realise they acted illegally. We received small amounts of money in the 1980's from the Mauritian Government, but after that, we were told by the Chagossian leaders, who in turn were told (by the Mauritian Government) that we should not look to the British for any help. As I have said, no advice was given to us in the 1980's about our legal rights and thereafter no one seemed to be responsible – only in 1999 were we told by Attorney Sivakumaren Mardemootoo that there might be something we could do to complain about all this and ask this Honourable Court to give us justice.
112. We first met with Attorney Mr S. Mardemootoo in or about 1998, he informed us that there might be procedures and remedies available to us before the English Courts. Of course, we had no evidence on which to found our case for illegal action but by 1999 some materials had been found which I am told, became available 30 years after our removal.
113. The Mauritian Government after the payments in the 1980's were only interested in sovereignty of the Chagos, which was not of help in relieving our poverty.

THE CHAGOS ISLANDERS GROUP LITIGATION

114. Statement of Truth:

I believe that the facts contained in this Witness Statement are true.

Signed :  light brown thumbprint of Lisette Marie Talate
affixed in the presence of the undersigned Notary
Public
LISETTE MARIE TALATE (bearer of NIC N: T/190341/00/0010/3 issued
on 04.12.96 produced to the undersigned
Notary Public)
Dated this third day of October 2002

Port-Louis, Mauritius.

Signed in the presence of and statement translated from English into

Creole by :


ROLAND CONSTANTIN
NOTARY PUBLIC

Mr. Roland Constantin, Notary Public, of 4th Floor, Saint James Court, Port-Louis, Mauritius.