



The Rt Hon Lord Cameron
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
SW1A 2AH

[by email]

12 March 2024

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Concerning the Chagossians

The Overseas Territories Sub-Committee has recently examined the situation regarding the BIOT/Chagos Islands. As well as taking oral evidence, we also met with a number of Chagossian communities and individuals to inform our thinking. We have attached the note from this meeting for your information and the extensive written evidence is available online. We understand that negotiations regarding sovereignty are ongoing and we are fully supportive of a successful conclusion and outcome that ensures continued operation of the base at Diego Garcia, which plays a fundamental role in global security. Regardless of the outcome of these talks, there are a number of steps which we believe that the Government could and should take immediately, to address the concerns of Chagossian communities in the UK and overseas.

1. Engagement with the Chagossian community

We recognise the diaspora are widely scattered and sometimes hold diverse opinions about the islands and their own future. The FCDO has a duty to learn from past mistakes and ensure that it has done its utmost to facilitate meaningful engagement with Chagossian communities. This is currently insufficient. To this end, we ask that the FCDO establish a permanent desk officer focussed exclusively on engaging with Chagossian communities in the UK. Their primary task should be to improve communication and relations, bridging what has become too wide a gap between the UK Government and the Chagossian communities, and ensuring the Chagossian Support Package is properly administered. Similar roles have previously been created at the FCDO to engage with the Somali community in the UK, and therefore this does not set a new precedent, but also recognises the special nature of this community and our obligations to them.

2. Chagossian resettlement

We stand by the conclusion of the Foreign Affairs Committee in its 2008 report that there is a strong moral case for resettlement. Moreover, we remain unconvinced by the arguments of the Government that such a resettlement is unsustainable. The Chagossians



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should have the right to return to their ancestral home regardless of the administering country. Preventing this perpetuates an historic injustice against their people. From the evidence we have received it is currently the UK Government, and only the UK Government, standing in the way of this taking place. We could establish no evidence of objections from the US Government. The Government should immediately begin the process of preparing for a pilot resettlement programme on an outlying island in partnership with the Mauritian and US Governments, Chagossian groups, and with the input of the scientific community. We also encourage the Government to restart Heritage Visits, which have been suspended since the pandemic.

In addition to working with the US Government on the approach and phasing of resettlements, we also urge the Government to hold discussions with the US Government on how they intend to contribute to the process of resettlement. We believe the US should be making financial commitments to support this process given the benefits they derive from the base at Diego Garcia and their role in operating the base. We will follow up on this in coming months with you.

3. Chagossian Support Package

It is unacceptable that such a small amount of the Chagossian Support Package has been spent to date when there is clearly a significant need. Insufficient effort has been made to ensure Chagossian communities are aware of this fund. We are also concerned with lack of projects to support Chagossians in the Seychelles. We ask for the following:

- Information on any evaluation made of the impact of the package to date, and any plans for participatory needs assessment to adequately plan for future spending – including large-scale projects.
- An explanation of whether or not it is possible to allocate funds from the CSP to support arriving Chagossians.
- The percentage of projects submitted that have been approved?
- The number of applications that have been received to support Chagossians in the Seychelles and information on what the FCDO is doing to publicise the opportunity and support applications.
- An update on plans to continue the Mauritius based initiatives such as the British Council English language training and bursaries for students.
- Plans for future Heritage Visits.

We encourage the FCDO to use the role of the desk officer (recommended above) to raise awareness of the fund, support Chagossian groups with applications to this fund and to consult them on the criteria of eligibility for grants, and support delivery of the fund.



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4. Environmental protection

We believe there are opportunities for Chagossians to take part in the environmental protection of the area. The UK Government has an important role to play in making sure their voices are meaningfully included in discussions around the future protection of this important habitat. Continuity of environmental protection is vital, and this should be front and centre of the Government's future planning on environmental issues.

We would ask that you write to us with your response on the above suggestions by 25 March 2024. We intend to publish your response.

Yours,

ALICIA KEARNS



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NOTE: Engagement event with representatives from the Chagossian community in the UK

Wednesday 31 January 2024; 2.00-3.45pm

Please note: Comments are anonymised and not all views were shared by all contributors.

Participants

Alicia Kearns MP (chair)
Henry Smith MP (chair)
Brendan O'Hara MP
Ranil Jayawardena MP
Fabian Hamilton MP
Alison Thewliss MP
Chagos Refugee's Group
Chagossian Voices
Chagos Islander's Movement
Chagossian Elderly West Sussex Club

Chris Shaw (Clerk)
Johnny Hingston (inquiry manager)

Migration and arrival in the UK

- One person was left in the Seychelles aged 2; her father was not allowed to run a business as a carpenter. He could only provide for himself. The family was therefore very poor. She does not have a British birth certificate, even if born under British governance. The Mauritius government says she was “born in Mauritius” when it wasn’t so referred to. She has a British passport and is entitled to a Seychelles passport. She cannot work in the Seychelles because she is counted as a foreigner, even as married to a Seychellean.
- Certificates and forms are dependent on the government of Mauritius
- It is hard for people to prove their heritage; they want access to 4,000 documents that Mauritius holds to prove heritage. Some birth certificates are handwritten and have mistakes in the names recorded so it is very difficult to prove heritage. People providing information were illiterate so name spellings were not always accurate.
- As a result, the Home Office may not grant citizenship or give passports. Home Office officials are not familiar with the change in the law allowing citizenship for subsequent generations. Government departments are not aware of the issue, and this affects the provision of benefits and other services.
- Even with a British passport, participants felt that they are not treated as British citizens, and are asked questions by local officials about their birth and circumstances. People are being sent to Mauritius in spite of being entitled to live in the UK, with British passports.
- One participant has no pension and is faced with losing her house due to financial pressures. The Council is rude and unhelpful.
- The support fund has been used for heritage trips, but very difficult to access funds for other things as bar has been set too high for them to apply. They feel like it has been made difficult on purpose. They don’t have trust in UK Government – the application criteria are very different to understand and the scheme wasn’t explained properly. £40m not enough. Would like to have seen more consultation when setting up.
- Some Chagossians feel intimidated by British people, which deters them from asking questions and applying for support. There is a lot of churn of staff in local Government so a broader understanding of the Chagossian situation would be good.
- UK is helping Ukraine resist their occupiers. Some participants were concerned that their “tolerance” is a weakness. But the FCDO is not helping those who have been removed from their islands. Some questioned: is it because the colour of their skin?

- Some participants want to put pressure on Government to abolish spouse visas and need special immigration laws for Chagossians.
- There was a request to see a dedicated desk office at FCDO/Home Office to reduce the administrative burden.
- They want to be trusted more.

Support package

- The UK Government does not listen and has done nothing – the £40 million support package has not resulted in any seen benefits. It is being distributed through the Sussex community foundation; but this requires a good level of literacy, which not everyone entitled to it possesses. There are no Chagossian members of the board that distributes the money.
- The money was announced in November 2016, after the KPMG report. Responses to FOI requests on the spending of the money have taken a long time to get and indicate that only £1m has been spent. Participants raised that they have asked for a community centre in Crawley, to share Chagossian culture with the locals.
- A business case for a community centre has been put forward, to help people navigate the system.
- Half of the £40 m support package should be given to the Chagossians, who suffered from being uprooted and moved, and badly treated.
- The support fund has been used for heritage trips, but very difficult to access funds for other things as bar has been set too high for them to apply. Some feel like it has been made difficult on purpose. They don't have trust in UK Government – the application criteria are very difficult to understand and the scheme wasn't explained properly. £40m not enough. Would like to have seen more consultation when setting up.
- Some were told "You only have a British passport but you are told you are not British." Other points:
 - What they need from the fund is more money for the kind of support [certain organisations] are giving to those arriving.
 - Bursaries for students studying at Middlesex University in Mauritius have been made available. Could have bursaries here too.
 - Education has got Chagossians out of poverty in Mauritius.
 - Abolish spouse visa.
 - Temporary accommodation needed.

- Funding application for West Sussex Elderly Chagossian Club not hard to complete. The services are very important for the elderly. They need to have somewhere to go to not just once a week.
- A group is campaigning for a cultural centre. They are happy to start small with their projects and can be trained – but insist they can do it.

The islands and resettlement

- The original sum was £55 million (for the support fund), but was reduced to £40 million. The base in Diego Garcia has been used to launch missiles in Afghanistan and Iran. It was once a homeland for people living in peace. Contractors from all over the world go there.
- Many have been on heritage visits to Diego Garcia. Some participants expressed the view that most Chagossians are not against the presence of the military base but they do not want the island handed to Mauritius without their consent.
- In terms of sovereignty negotiations, (senior official) from the FCDO could not answer any questions about the state of the talks, so what was the point of the meeting? The meetings have been online only – three of them. Completely unsatisfactory – no record of the meetings, nor mechanisms for feedback.
- The future state of the islands needs to be based on the views of Chagossians. Will the Government respect their views? There is support from some groups for sovereignty remaining with the UK.
- Some are more focussed on reparations for the crime that was commissioned in the past re sovereignty of the islands. One group said – there is no trust of the UK government or the Mauritius government. There is no trust of either side. Difficult to say who they trust least!
- One participant estimated that 90% would be in favour of British sovereignty.
- One participant expressed concern that if sovereignty went to Mauritius, they would no longer be regarded as Chagossian.
- In international law, the view was the islands should be returned to Mauritius, in a non-binding decision. The judgment left the door open to returning to the issue after discussions with those affected, which has not happened.
- One participant asserted that the Mauritian government has done nothing for Chagossians.

- In negotiations, the UK might try to keep Diego Garcia only, and cede the rest. Will Mauritius allow a form of resettlement? There is little trust and lots of corruption. The Government is after money from the US for the military base. No trust in them facilitating resettlement.
- Time for UK Government to take responsibility for British citizens who feel like refugees. Need help to integrate before any resettlement happens.
- Govt needs to apologise in public and to follow up with actions.
- Will the UK Government support the right of self-determination for the Chagossian people?
- Will the UK Government stop making decisions without the consent of the Chagossian people? The consensus is around self-determination and UK sovereignty. UK should listen to the people, as it would re Gibraltar and the Falklands. There also should be action to enable the community to access various means of support without a complex application process. It needs to be accessible (eg funeral grants).
- Some think the reason why they are treated differently to the Falklands is to do with race and skin colour.
- Sri Lankans are on the islands but are not being removed – why?
- The Governor referred to Chagossians as “Man Fridays” – highly insulting.
- The MPA was introduced without any consultation with islanders and has been used as a bargaining chip.
- To participants the islands are not just a spot on the map, it is their ancestral home, temple, it is who they are.
- Islands represent their origin, identity, pride, sense of existence.
- The injustice they faced is a constant reminder of colonialism, racism and imperialism. They feel like others are ruling their destiny. Many dream of a day when children can live freely on the island without racism.
- Justice for many looks like being able to stay.
- 3rd generation – 6,000 have completed applications to come to the UK and 4,000 applications have been accepted so far. Many being trafficked to the UK by plane. There is a modern slavery problem for those who arrive. More funding needed to support arrivals.
- Mauritian Government has not consulted with them over the negotiations. The UK Government should have come to the Chagossians before the Mauritian Government. It might have made it easier with negotiations with the UK/Mauritian Government. It gives the impression that the UK Government don't think they are worth working with.

- There are a high number of children going into care from their community. There are many false allegations of mistreatment from neighbours who misunderstand their culture.
- So much damage has been done over the years and don't know how to be repaired.
- Some feel like bargaining chips to the Mauritian Government. But these contributors felt that they would not argue if Mauritius gets the islands, or China or anywhere, as long as they can go back to Chagos.
- One participant estimated that 90% of indigenous Chagossians would go back if given the opportunity.