

Written evidence submitted by Chagossian Voices (CHA0007)

Chagossian Voices is a platform for Chagossians and a coalition of Chagossian groups. Through our members and associated groups, we are in touch with thousands of Chagossians. Chagossian Voices was formed in 2020 by long established community activists and was central to the successful campaign to amend the Nationality and Borders Bill to grant UK Citizenship to all of Chagossian descent. CV also campaigns for Chagossian interests at a local and international level. We are currently conducting a campaign for the indigenous rights of Chagossians, through participation at the UN in New York and Geneva. We work with a range of NGOs including Human Rights Watch and the Chagos Conservation Trust.

Strategic Importance of BIOT

Most Chagossians we know recognise the strategic importance of BIOT and would be prepared to live alongside the military base in Diego Garcia. Chagossians were never consulted about their exile or the airbase and have never been offered the opportunity to remain on the islands as British Overseas Territories citizens.

Asserting Chagossian Rights

Chagossian Voices asserts the right of Chagossians to return to their islands. As an indigenous people, we assert their right of Chagossians to determine our own future and the future of our islands.

Restitution/Compensation

Chagossians remain a marginalised and disadvantaged community because of their enforced exile. Chagossians assert the right to restitution and compensation for abuses of their human rights, the removal from their homeland, the destruction of their livelihoods, homes, culture, and way of life. Chagossians require restitution and support for the multiple disadvantages and abuses they have experienced in exile.

The Sovereignty of the Islands

Chagossians have never been meaningfully or democratically consulted about the sovereignty of their islands by any Government or international organisation - including the International Court of Justice. Chagossians were completely excluded from all decision making at the time of their removal from the islands and had no voice in Mauritian independence. Chagossians had no independent voice at the ICJ in 2018/19, where the case put to the court dealt only with Mauritian rights of self-determination, and sidelined Chagossians as "Mauritians of Chagossian origin". We do not accept the advisory opinion of the court because Chagossians were not consulted and - as an indigenous people – Chagossians do not primarily identify as Mauritians.

Engagement in the Sovereignty Negotiations

In November 2021 the foreign secretary James Cleverly made the surprise announcement that the UK would begin talks with Mauritius on the sovereignty of the islands. Chagossians were not involved or consulted about this decision. We immediately wrote to Mr Cleverly and the FCDO explaining that Chagossians should be part of the negotiations and also made the request to Henry Smith MP, who also raised the issue with Mr Cleverly in a Parliamentary committee. Despite assurances that Chagossians would be consulted, the engagement meetings which have been organized have been completely unsatisfactory to all Chagossian groups represented. They are not part of the negotiations, they reveal nothing about what is going on in the negotiations and there is no formal mechanism by which what is said at the meetings is recorded, responded to or even fed back to the negotiating teams. The meetings are tokenistic and simply organized so the Government can say “We consulted the Chagossians”. We and other leading Chagossian groups wrote to Mr Cleverly and the FCDO in March 2023 explaining our dissatisfaction with the talks and asking for them to change. There has been no improvement, so we are withdrawing from these engagement sessions. The main points we raised in our letter to the Government were as follows:

1. The consultation session we attended has no formal relationship or input to the sovereignty negotiations and there appear to be no mechanisms in place by which the views expressed can influence the negotiations. This is unacceptable.
2. The Chagossian community is excluded entirely from the secret negotiations between the two governments. This is unacceptable.
3. No formal record was made of views expressed at the consultation and no feedback was given as to how the wishes and opinions of those present might be influence negotiations. This is unacceptable.
4. We have not been told about the purpose, progress and possible outcomes of the negotiations between Mauritius and the UK. This is unacceptable.
5. The consultation is tokenistic and has no purpose except to allow the negotiating parties to say they ‘consulted’ the community. This is unethical and unacceptable.
6. We expect a full democratic consultation of the Chagossian community in relation to our islands and will be obliged to withdraw from the consultations if they continue to be tokenistic and without any defined purpose. We require clarity from the UK Government as to how the outcomes of the consultations are recorded and how they are connected to and influence the negotiations between Mauritius and the UK.

General engagement with the Chagossian community

Engagement with the Chagossian community by the UK Government and in particular the FCDO has - until recently - been woeful. Having never consulted the Chagossians at the time of exile, the UK Government has for fifty years neglected the community, failed to communicate with them and completely lost track of who and where they are. When we first started meetings with the FCDO in December 2020, the FCDO told us they had the contact details of just 100 Chagossians. The KPMG consultation on the resettlement of Chagossians was an attempt to engage with the community but its outcomes were ignored and a £40 million support package was proposed with no plan for its implementation. The money sat largely untouched for four years until we and other Chagossian groups started approaching the FCDO for meetings to get the money moving in the interests of the community. It became clear to us that the BIOT Unit had little idea how to engage with the community, who or where they were or what their needs and priorities were.

Between 2020 and 2023 we have taken the initiative to have regular meetings with the BIOT team and improvements have been made with some effective individuals at FCDO allocated to dealing directly with the community. However, the £40 million still remains largely unspent. We see the reasons as:

1. An unwillingness to fund substantial projects as funding is allocated annually in quite modest amounts. A large-scale project -such as a community or cultural centre-is inconceivable when annual budget restraints only allow small scale spending.
2. FCDO has had difficulty identifying partners to distribute funds and in auditing need in the community. The co-operation with Sussex Community Foundation is a step in the right direction, but this only serves Chagossians in Crawley and Sussex. A proper audit of community need is required and a plan to deliver for Chagossians. Chagossians remain a vulnerable and disadvantaged community and the £40 million is urgently required to support them in education, employment, training, health and cultural life.
3. Most Chagossian community groups do not meet the formal requirements to make a bid to the fund. There is a lack of experience in the community in bidding, organizing and managing community initiatives and finances. Support is urgently needed to build capacity in the community to make bids and guidance in how to work in partnership with established organisations who can support the community.
4. Spending has completely stopped on heritage visits by Chagossians to Chagos - and this was meant to be a part of the £40 million package! Covid stopped them initially but they have not resumed due to the ongoing sovereignty negotiations. The heritage visits must resume at once.

Important priorities for spending which have not yet been addressed

1. A Chagossian community centre
2. A welcome and advice centre/helpline for Chagossians
3. Co-ordinated and targeted support in education and training
4. Co-ordinated and targeted support in health
5. Support with employment, business and enterprise.
6. Support with housing
7. Support with funeral costs
8. Support for Chagossian culture and language

The environment

Chagossian Voices supports the protection of the unique ecosystems and marine environment of the islands and believes this can be best achieved through a collaboration between the indigenous population, scientists and environmentalists. To this end we work co-operatively with the Chagos Conservation Trust and the Blue Marine Foundation. A member of Chagossian Voices is a trustee of the Chagos Conservation Trust. We believe in a sustainable future for the islands for the good of the islands, the oceans, the community and the planet.

The likely consequences of the UK Government's failure to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution with Mauritius over sovereignty.

We see the failure of these talks as an opportunity. We hope it will be an opportunity for debate and consultation between all stakeholders, especially the Chagossian people, nation states, environmentalists, and the armed forces. We see no real reason to simply hand Mauritius the islands because they were part of a colonial package which the UK inherited from France in 1814. We also believe it is utterly wrong to determine the future of the islands without the Chagossian people being at the centre of decision making.

Note on planned Minimum Income Requirement for spouses/family members

Following a sustained campaign by Chagossians Voices and other community groups, the Government were persuaded to grant UK citizenship to all of Chagossian descent in the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act. Proposals to raise the minimum income requirement to £29000 and then £38000 for spouses completely undermines this. Most Chagossians relocating to the UK will not earn anything near this amount and will be further burdened by visa fees and health surcharges, simply to maintain their family life - which is a human right.

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