**Committee: SPECPOL**

**Question: The Chagos Islands**

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**Summary**

The Chagos Archipelago, a group of over 60 islands located in the Indian Ocean, has become a focal point of international disputes. The controversy surrounding the Chagos Islands centres on the forced removal of the Chagossian people by the United Kingdom (UK) in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the continued UK administration of the islands despite global calls for their return to Mauritius.

After Mauritius gained independence from the UK in 1968, the UK retained control of the Chagos Islands, establishing them as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). This occurred despite Mauritius’ claim to the islands as part of its territory. The UK leased the largest island, Diego Garcia, to the United States, which has since been used as a key military base. The forced expulsion of the Chagossian people has led to decades of advocacy for their right to return and to compensation.

In 2024, the UK returned control of the Chagos Islands back to Mauritius, after years of negotiations. Diego Garcia is also included in this agreement, however the UK-US military base will remain on Diego Garcia. The voice of the Chagossian people has also not be considered properly when making this deal, with many feeling unheard in an agreement that affects them the most. This shows how this issue is still problematic, even after the recent agreement between the UK and Mauritius.

The case of the Chagos Islands is emblematic of the tension between decolonisation, state sovereignty, and military strategy. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion in 2019 stating that the UK's administration of the islands is unlawful and called for their return to Mauritius, the dispute remains unresolved. Resolving the question of the Chagos Islands will require balancing the rights of the Chagossian people, Mauritius’ sovereignty claims, and the strategic interests of the UK and the US.



**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Chagos Archipelago**: A group of islands in the Indian Ocean claimed by Mauritius but administered by the UK as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT).

**Chagossian People**: The Chaggosian people were the inhabitants of the Chagos islands that were forcibly removed from 1967-1971. They were descended from African slaves and Indian plantation workers, and now reside mainly in Mauritius and Seychelles.

**British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)**: A colonial territory established by the UK in 1965, encompassing the Chagos Archipelago.

**Decolonisation**: The process through which colonies gain independence from colonial powers, often guided by UN General Assembly resolutions.

**International Court of Justice (ICJ)**: The principal judicial body of the United Nations, which issued a 2019 advisory opinion on the status of the Chagos Islands.

**Diego Garcia**: The largest island in the Chagos Archipelago, leased by the UK to the US for use as a military base.

**Self-Determination**: The right of peoples to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

**Background Information**

The Chagos Islands, initially uninhabited, were discovered by Portuguese explorers in the 16th century. Due to their position on major international trade routes, the became a focus of competing claims by European powers. In the late 18th century, France took possession of the archipelago as a dependency of Mauritius. Coconut plantations were established there, and slaves imported from Africa to work them. Britain took control of Mauritius, Seychelles, and the Chagos Islands in 1814, under the Treaty of Paris.

During the Cold War, an agreement between the UK and US led to the creation of the BIOT in 1965 for the purpose of establishing defence and communications facilities to counteract the strong Soviet presence in the region. The BIOT included the Chagos Archipelago as well as the Farquhar and Desroches islands. Seychelles became independent in 1976, and the islands of Farquhar and Desroches were given back. In 1971, a military base was built on Diego Garcia and the plantations removed. From 1967 to 1973, the UK government forcibly removed around 1,500 Chagossian people from the archipelago. When Mauritius became independent in 1968, the Chagos islands remained as part of the BIOT under British rule.

Expansion of the military facilities during the 1970s and 80s was opposed by neighbouring states as it compromised the nonmilitarized status of the Indian Ocean region. Numerous air strikes were launched from Diego Garcia during the Persian Gulf War, the US-Afghanistan War, and the US-Iraq War.

**The British High Court Ruling (2000)**

In 2000 the British High Court rules that the removal of the Chagossian people has been illegal, and granted them the right to return to any island in the archipelago, except Diego Garcia. At the time, UK and US officials opposed the plan for resettlement, but the court withheld it’s decision in 2006. In 2008, a panel of five Law Lords ruled against the resettlement on the islanders.

**The ICJ Advisory Opinion (2019)**

In response to a request from the UN General Assembly, the ICJ ruled that the UK’s continued administration of the Chagos Islands is unlawful and that the islands should be returned to Mauritius. The ICJ highlighted that the separation of the islands in 1965 violated international law, particularly UNGA Resolution 1514, which emphasises the right to self-determination.

The ruling was non-binding, however it did carry much international weight. By 2024, the UK agreed to give back the islands to Mauritius, including annual payments and infrastructure investment for the islands. This will pave the way for the Chagossian people to resettle the islands. However, the military base on Diego Garcia will still function and be controlled by the UK and US.

**Major Countries and Organisations Involved**

1. **United Kingdom**:
   * Administered the Chagos Archipelago as BIOT.
   * Removed 1,500 Chagossian people from the islands to make way for a military base.
   * Justified its position on the basis of strategic military agreements with the US.
   * Has agreed to transfer control of the islands back to Mauritius, along with annual payments and infrastructure investment.
2. **Mauritius**:
   * Claims sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, arguing that their separation violated international law.
   * Advocates for the rights of the Chagossian people to return to their homeland.
   * Gained ICJ and UNGA support for its sovereignty claims.
3. **United States**:
   * Operates a significant military base on Diego Garcia under a lease agreement with the UK.
   * Considers the base critical for operations in the Indian Ocean and surrounding regions.
4. **Chagossian Community**:
   * Consists of displaced islanders and their descendants.
   * Continues to advocate for the right to return to the Chagos Islands and to receive compensation.
5. **United Nations**:
   * The UN General Assembly has repeatedly called for the decolonisation of the Chagos Islands.
   * The ICJ’s advisory opinion reaffirmed the illegality of the UK’s administration.

**Timeline of Events**

**1965** UK separates Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius, creating BIOT.

**1968–1973** Forced removal of Chagossians from the islands to Mauritius and Seychelles.

**1980s–1990s** Chagossians begin legal challenges in UK courts for their right to return.

**2019** ICJ issues advisory opinion declaring UK’s administration unlawful.

**2020** UNGA adopts resolution urging the UK to return the islands to Mauritius.

**2024**  The UK transfers control of the Chagos islands to Mauritius.

**Relevant UN Treaties and Events**

**UN Charter (1945)**: Articles 1(2) and 73 emphasise self-determination and the decolonisation of non-self-governing territories.

**UNGA Resolution 1514 (1960)**: Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

**ICJ Advisory Opinion on Chagos (2019)**: Found the UK’s administration of the islands unlawful and called for their return to Mauritius.

**UNGA Resolution 73/295 (2019)**: Urged the UK to end its colonial administration and called for international cooperation in resolving the issue.

**UK and Mauritius Joint Statement 03/10/24**: The governments of Mauritius and the UK gave a statement on the Chagos archipelago, mentioning the transfer of control.

**Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

**Legal Challenges by Chagossians**:

* Chagossians have pursued cases in UK courts to secure their right to return. While some rulings acknowledged the injustices they faced, resettlement remains blocked.

**Compensation Offers**:

* The UK has provided compensation to some displaced Chagossians but has not recognised their right to return.

**ICJ and UNGA Involvement**:

* The ICJ’s 2019 opinion and subsequent UNGA resolutions have increased international pressure on the UK, but enforcement mechanisms remain weak.

**Diplomatic Efforts by Mauritius**:

* Mauritius has sought to build international support for its sovereignty claims, framing the issue as part of the broader decolonisation agenda.

**UK Reparation Efforts to Mauritius**:

* After transferring control of the islands to Mauritius, the UK government will give annual payments and infrastructure investments for the archipelago to the Mauritius government.

**Possible Solutions**

**Facilitating Chagossian Resettlement**:

* International funding could support infrastructure development on the islands to enable the return of the Chagossian community.
* A joint administration agreement between Mauritius and the UK could ensure the sustainable resettlement of displaced people.

**Mediation Between Mauritius and the UK**:

* UN or regional bodies could mediate discussions to find a compromise, such as shared sovereignty or an extended lease for Diego Garcia.

**Strengthening Decolonisation Mechanisms**:

* The UN could enhance mechanisms to ensure compliance with ICJ rulings and international law on decolonisation.

**International Advocacy for Chagossian Rights**:

* NGOs and international organisations should continue advocating for the rights of displaced Chagossians to ensure their voices remain central to the debate.

**Conclusion**

The question of the Chagos Islands is a complex issue that intersects with international law, decolonisation, and geopolitical strategy. Resolving the dispute will require addressing the historical injustices faced by the Chagossian people, respecting Mauritius’ sovereignty claims, and balancing the strategic interests of the UK and the US. A sustainable and just resolution will depend on robust international cooperation and the willingness of all parties to engage in meaningful dialogue. Whilst, the views of the Mauritius and UK governments must be considered, it is important to focus on the voice of the Chagossian people, as they are most affected by resolutions regarding this question.

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