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Man Fridays: Wikileaks exposes UK tricks to deny the Chagossians the right to return home

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A 2009 cable on Diego Garcia released by WikiLeaks shows how little has changed in the UK colonialist mindset in the past 50 years. In public the UK government shows “regret at the way the resettlement of the Chagossians was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s and at the hardship that followed” for the people of Chagos, living in exile for 40 years now. In private the government continues to plot secretly to deny the Chagossians their right to return.

The UK government deported the Chagossians in the 1960s and 1970s and dumped them on the shores of the Seychelles and Mauritius. They split off the Chagos Archipelago from the Mauritian colony. This was done so secretly that not even the British Parliament was informed. The fate and future of the 2500 Chagossians were sacrificed to make way for a U.S. military base on Diego Garcia, the largest of the Chagos Islands. For the traumatised Chagossians the British government back then showed nothing but disdain. In diplomatic cables declassified a couple years ago, the population of the Chagos Islands was called ‘negligible’, just a few ‘man Fridays’.

It’s been argued by some apologists that we shouldn’t judge governments of the past with the wisdom of today. It was a different era they say, with different values, a different world view. Fair enough. So let us judge the current British government on what it says and does today.

Thanks to WikiLeaks we know that UK Office Territories director Colin Roberts assures the US Embassy that continuation of the military operations from Diego Garcia is not in any danger, because the UK will not allow any ‘human footprint’..... ‘no man Fridays’! The use of the Robinson Crusoe reference was painful in the 1960s. It is outrageous in 2009. It shows how little has changed in the mindset of the British world view. With the empire long gone, British imperialism and latent racism are still going strong.

Moreover Roberts admits in the cable that “We do not regret the removal of the population” and triumphantly explains to the US Embassy how they came up with a new trick. They’ll make the whole of Chagos a ‘Marine Protected Area’ a wildlife reserve where no human can go. Well, not the whole of Chagos of course: the US base can stay on Diego Garcia despite its responsibility for fuel leaks and coral reef demolition.

It’s a smart trick, Roberts explains, because the environmentalist groups in the UK fell for it. What about the Chagossians?, the U.S. asks. No need to worry about them, Roberts explains, because “the UK’s environmental lobby is far more powerful than the Chagossians’ advocates.” And “establishing a

marine park would, in effect, put paid to resettlement claims of the archipelago's former residents." Negligible then, negligible now.

Indeed a lot has changed since the 1960s. Back then, the UK was able to keep the deportation of the Chagossians a secret from the world, and the illegitimate partition of the Mauritian colony hidden from the UN. Back then, classified documents remained classified for decades. Today, information leaks within a year, showing how the UK government of today maintains its shameful strategy of denying the Chagossians their rights and how it uses the environmental lobby to do public campaigning for them.

There's every chance that in the 150,000 cables yet to be leaked more painful conversations on Chagos will appear. A clever politician wouldn't wait for the next cable, but would finally, after forty years 'put paid' to the British strategy of island theft and deportation. As for the environmentalist groups, they should realise that they have been trying to please the wrong crowd. It is not the British government that gets to decide on the future of Chagos. It is the people of Chagos you need to negotiate with.

Many Chagossians are genuinely interested in the idea to make part of their country a nature reserve. It could - when done properly and with their input - generate income for those Chagossians that choose to go back to live in their own country. They could live on Diego Garcia and some of the other habitable Islands, and still reserve the majority of the vast archipelago for a wildlife reserve. But it is up to them, not to the colonial power illegitimately occupying their home, nor to the environmentalists eager to notch up an environmental victory.

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P.S.

* From TNI, January 2011:

<http://www.tni.org/article/man-fridays-wikileaks-exposes-uk-tricks-deny-chagossians-right-return-home>

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