

Displacement

Foreign military bases often lead to displacement and disenfranchisement. The massive land areas occupied by US military bases are often appropriated from people who are given no choice about leaving their homes and farmland, and are often not compensated. Once bases are established they tend to sprawl outwards, consuming more and more land. Environmental degradation makes the surrounding areas uninhabitable. Communal farmland is also taken, which is even less likely to be properly compensated, despite the fact that many people's livelihoods are dependent on it. The bases provide only menial jobs in exchange, and even these may be denied to locals as a result of discrimination or security fears.

"In a significant number of cases, bases have been responsible for seizing the land and property of local peoples and forcibly removing them in the process" says David Vine, an anthropologist working with the displaced Chagossian people of Diego Garcia (see page 24). "These types of expulsions have generally resulted in the impoverishment of the affected groups and the profound and destructive alteration of their ways of life."

In Vieques, for instance, two-thirds of the island has been occupied by US military bases and land assigned for military exercises. This has been the subject of a decades-long struggle by inhabitants for the right to return and to have their land cleared of pollution and abandoned munitions. In Honduras, peasants thrown off their land in the 1980s to provide bases for the Contra and US forces to attack Northern Nicaragua were permanently dispossessed after longer-term agreements entrenched the bases and the US military presence.

Similar stories can be found as far apart as Okinawa in Japan or Thule in Greenland.

In addition to the loss of land and livelihoods, the expulsion of people from their land can have deeper cultural significance. At Thule, for example, one of the few remaining communities of Polar Inuit have been excluded from their traditional hunting grounds for decades, destroying an entire way of life and forcing indigenous peoples into ethnocentrically designed “modern” housing schemes designed to “integrate” them into the Danish state.

This sense that certain smaller indigenous groups – be they Inuit, Chamorros from Guam or Chagossians – can be forced off their land and displaced without compensation pervades the struggles over many US bases. US authorities have united with national governments to, in effect, ethnically cleanse minority groups, leaving them in legal limbo with few means of claiming their rights.



Diego Garcia

In 1971 the horrified islanders of Diego Garcia, the Chagossians, watched as every dog on the island was rounded up, herded by the British authorities into sealed sheds, gassed, and burnt. This was part of the final stage of the expulsion of the Chagossians from their land – for several years anyone leaving the islands for medical treatment, holidays or work had been prevented from returning. Now that their culturally significant dogs had been slaughtered, the entire human population was to be forcibly expelled. Some were simply dumped on the docks of Mauritius and the Seychelles.

The handover of Diego Garcia to the US military had begun in 1960. The resulting major base is still operational today, providing the launch point for many recent US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Chagossians have largely been left in dire poverty. Small amounts of compensation were paid in the late 1970s, which were largely used to pay off debts incurred by the dispossessed people, who were given no support in finding jobs or houses. Despite two High Court rulings on the illegality of their expulsion, the British government is still appealing against the verdict, while the US government and courts deny all responsibility. Studies carried out as late as 2004 show that many Chagossians remain totally marginalised economically, and they are racially barred from getting labouring jobs on Diego Garcia.

David Vine, an anthropologist and supporter of the Chagossians' right to return to Diego Garcia, has documented the damage the expulsion has caused the people. "A clear and terrible injustice has been committed against this people by the United States

and its government. It has never accepted any responsibility for its actions nor done anything to ease the plight of the Chagossians, who have been mired in poverty ever since the expulsion," says Vine. He has worked with Chagossian communities in the slums of Mauritius and the Seychelles to document the impacts of decades of dispossession in terms of mental and physical health, alienation, unemployment and political disenfranchisement. He has created a compensation model to show how much the Chagossians are owed as a result of the expulsion and has demonstrated that they are the indigenous people of Diego Garcia and the Chagos Archipelago.

The Chagossians are still attempting to win the right of return to their homeland, from which they have been exiled for more than 30 years, as well as proper compensation for their expulsion, and the right to work on the base.

