# Starmer’s Chagos Islands deal sparks turmoil over sovereignty and security



The recent decision by the UK government to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius has stirred significant controversy, reflecting complex historical and political dimensions. At the heart of the matter is the ongoing question of the Chagos Islands, home to the strategically critical Diego Garcia military base, which has been under British control since the early 19th century. The agreement, which includes a 99-year leaseback of the base, has been framed by Prime Minister Keir Starmer as a necessary step to ensure national security and maintain strategic partnerships, particularly with the United States. However, reactions from various quarters suggest that this move is fraught with complications and optics that may undermine its justification.

The negotiations leading to this deal originated under previous Conservative administrations, with key figures like James Cleverly and David Cameron initiating discussions. Starmer’s administration, however, has faced scrutiny over the details and implications of the final agreement, particularly its financial aspects and the historic grievances of the Chagossian people. Critics, including prominent figures in the Conservative party, have argued that the deal represents a betrayal of British territory. Shadow Foreign Secretary Kemi Badenoch has gone so far as to label it an "immoral surrender," claiming it is indicative of Labour's failure to safeguard national interests.

Adding complexity to the situation, the agreement stipulates a payment of £101 million annually for the use of Diego Garcia. Yet, estimates of the total cost have varied wildly, with some estimates suggesting figures as high as £18 billion. Starmer's initial assertions regarding the agreement's financial implication were met with scepticism; some commentators have described his defence of the costs as “arithmetical gibberish.” The discrepancy in financial projections suggests a broader uncertainty about the long-term viability and justification of the arrangement, much akin to the infamous "gold sale" undertaken by Gordon Brown, which has historically been portrayed as a blunder.

For the displaced Chagossians, the agreement feels like yet another chapter in a long history of injustice. The nearly 2,000 islanders forcibly removed from their homes in the 1960s and 70s have seen little in the way of remedy or restitution since their removal. Although the recent deal includes a £40 million fund aimed at addressing their plight, many Chagossians are voicing that this effort falls woefully short of rectifying the historical wrongs they have suffered. Figures like Bernadette Dugasse have expressed profound disappointment, emphasising that their calls for the right to return have been overlooked in high-level negotiations. The deep emotional toll of displacement, alongside the fear of losing cultural heritage as the original community dwindles, presents a haunting backdrop to these discussions.

Starmer's assertion that this deal would secure Britain’s military position and prevent possible adversarial advances, particularly concerning China's influence in the region, signals an attempt to frame the agreement within a narrative of national security strategy. However, the strength of Mauritius's claim over the Chagos Islands remains contested, and the implications of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion—which suggests the islands belong to Mauritius—are still met with doubt regarding enforcement. Critics suggest that Starmer’s justifications may reflect an underlying reluctance to confront the deal's more contentious aspects, particularly as the UK seeks to navigate its post-Brexit diplomatic landscape.

As Starmer attempts to bolster his position through international agreements, including trade deals with key partners post-Brexit, the potential fallout from the Chagos deal looms large. The decision risks overshadowing what may be perceived as political victories, placing Starmer in a precarious position both domestically and internationally. With heightened scrutiny from the opposition and a populace weary of complex political narratives, the broader implications of the Chagos Islands agreement will likely resonate throughout Starmer’s tenure, complicating his ambitions in an already tumultuous political landscape.

Ultimately, while the Chagos Islands deal is presented as a strategic necessity, its consequences extend beyond immediate politics, revealing profound concerns over historical grievances, national identity, and the ethical considerations foundational to British colonial legacies. As public sentiment continues to grapple with these issues, the long-standing hope for justice among the Chagossian people remains a poignant reminder of the enduring impacts of colonialism and the struggle for recognition.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chagos-islands-mauritius-starmer-diego-garcia-b2756625.html), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/81d046b333b0af81489ed75543f9534b)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chagos-islands-mauritius-starmer-diego-garcia-b2756625.html), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/5808b0ac-0610-41ad-b794-77575d359037)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/97e1acb6d1accbb0fb65d08357595e08), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/starmer-chagos-islands-deal-kemi-badenoch-pmqs-b1209277.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://apnews.com/article/97e1acb6d1accbb0fb65d08357595e08), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/starmer-chagos-islands-deal-kemi-badenoch-pmqs-b1209277.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/81d046b333b0af81489ed75543f9534b)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chagos-islands-mauritius-starmer-diego-garcia-b2756625.html), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/81d046b333b0af81489ed75543f9534b)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/chagos-islands-mauritius-starmer-diego-garcia-b2756625.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/ffe9c7ca-52de-457e-ab50-8bc6df5296b0> - The Financial Times' 'Political Fix' podcast discusses Labour leader Keir Starmer's post-Brexit EU deal and its political implications. The deal re-establishes trade and diplomatic ties, including a defense partnership and restored electricity market cooperation. A veterinary agreement easing food trade and a contentious 12-year fisheries access compromise are key elements. While Starmer markets the deal as economical and pragmatic, critics like Kemi Badenoch label it a surrender due to dynamic alignment with EU rules. Public and political response has been muted, reflecting Brexit fatigue, though concerns about sovereignty and immigration persist. In a parallel development, Starmer finalized the Chagos Islands sovereignty transfer to Mauritius, securing the UK-US military base access for 99 years in return for £101 million annually. Though criticized by Badenoch, the agreement garnered international support, aligning Britain with allies and countering strategic threats. Domestically, Starmer faces challenges, including prison policy reform and economic pressures. While his global diplomacy, backed by advisors like Jonathan Powell, strengthens his international standing, thin domestic strategy and weak communication risk political vulnerability. Analysts speculate on future party positions regarding EU relations, customs unions, and further alignment, with electoral dynamics and public sentiment influencing long-term directions.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/97e1acb6d1accbb0fb65d08357595e08> - Displaced Chagossians, including Bernadette Dugasse, are expressing despair and anger following the U.K.'s announcement of a sovereignty transfer agreement for the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. Dugasse, forced to leave Diego Garcia as a toddler, represents the over 1,500 Chagos islanders who were evicted between the 1950s and 1970s to make way for a U.S. military base. Despite Britain's acknowledgment of the wrongful removal and granting of citizenship, return has been continuously denied, citing security and financial concerns. The recent U.K.-Mauritius deal, which includes a 99-year lease-back of the Diego Garcia base to Britain, excludes any guarantees for Chagossian resettlement. Dugasse and fellow islander Bertrice Pompe attempted legal action to block the agreement, criticizing both governments for ignoring Chagossians in negotiations. Human rights groups decry the ongoing displacement as a colonial injustice. Many Chagossians, now dispersed across the U.K., Seychelles, and Mauritius, fear they may never return to their homeland. Dugasse's visits to Diego Garcia were brief and heavily restricted, deepening her sorrow. She emphasizes the unique cultural identity of Chagossians and advocates for their right to return, fearing their heritage may vanish as elderly natives pass away.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/81d046b333b0af81489ed75543f9534b> - On May 22, 2025, the UK and Mauritius finalized an agreement to transfer sovereignty over the disputed Chagos Islands to Mauritius, excluding Diego Garcia, which will remain under British control due to its vital US military base. The archipelago, home to over 60 islands in the Indian Ocean, has been under British control since 1814. In the 1960s and 70s, the UK forcibly evicted about 2,000 Chagossians to allow the US to build the base, prompting international criticism and legal disputes. The deal faced delays due to political changes in Mauritius, financial disagreements over leasing Diego Garcia, and a review by the US under President Trump. Ultimately, Britain agreed to pay £101 million ($136 million) annually to lease the base for 99 years. While hailed by the Biden administration as securing strategic interests, it drew criticism from UK conservatives and US officials for potential security risks. The deal leaves questions for the displaced Chagossians, who were excluded from negotiations and uncertain about their right to return. Some claim the arrangement perpetuates historical injustices. A proposed resettlement fund for islanders outside Diego Garcia remains vague in implementation. The agreement awaits approval by the UK Parliament.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/5808b0ac-0610-41ad-b794-77575d359037> - The UK is poised to finalize a pivotal and contentious agreement to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, potentially as early as Thursday. The deal includes a multibillion-pound payment, enabling the UK and US to retain joint access to the strategically vital Diego Garcia military base under a 99-year lease. The agreement has sparked political backlash, especially from the opposition Conservative party, with Shadow Foreign Secretary Priti Patel condemning it as a loss of sovereign territory and a financial burden on taxpayers. Critics accuse Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer of prioritizing international relations over national interests. However, Labour officials maintain that the negotiations originated under the previous Conservative government and are necessary for compliance with international law. Though US concerns over the deal initially existed, President Donald Trump has expressed support, assuring continued military cooperation. The agreement marks another major policy step following the UK’s post-Brexit diplomatic reset with the European Union. Labour has noted parliamentary ratification is still required before the deal is finalized.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/starmer-chagos-islands-deal-kemi-badenoch-pmqs-b1209277.html> - Sir Keir Starmer has defended the controversial Chagos Islands deal after the Conservative leader branded it an 'immoral surrender'. The Government plans to give the British Indian Ocean Territory back to Mauritius and pay to lease the strategically important US-UK military base on the largest island, Diego Garcia. But questions have been raised about the skyrocketing cost of the deal amid suggestions it could cost Britain up to £18 billion. Kemi Badenoch began Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday by telling the Commons: 'When Labour negotiates, our country loses.' She added: 'We heard the Government offered £18 billion for Mauritius to take our territory in the Chagos Islands.'
7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-prime-minister-mauritius-stephen-doughty-james-cleverly-b1209271.html> - Sir Keir Starmer has warned national security could be put at risk without a deal to give 'legal certainty' over the status of the Chagos Islands and the strategically important Diego Garcia military base. The UK has denied the cost of handing over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius could rise to £18 billion and disputed claims made by the Mauritian prime minister about the renegotiated deal. Sir Keir’s Government plans to hand the British Indian Ocean Territory to Mauritius but pay to lease back the US-UK military base on Diego Garcia. Without legal certainty, the base cannot operate in practical terms as it should. That is bad for our national security and it's a gift for our adversaries.