# UK signs sovereignty deal with Mauritius over Chagos Islands despite security and historical concerns



In an unexpected and controversial move, the UK government has signed an agreement to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, a decision that has sparked intense debate about national security, international relations, and historical justice. The deal, which involves a long-term lease arrangement allowing the UK to maintain operational control over the vital military base on Diego Garcia, aims to address both legal challenges and geopolitical vulnerabilities stemming from the prolonged status of these islands.

The Chagos Islands, which the UK has governed since 1814, have been a contentious topic since the forced displacement of around 2,000 Chagossians in the 1960s to allow the establishment of the strategic US-UK military base on Diego Garcia. This controversial history has often overshadowed discussions surrounding the islands. The recent signing of the agreement, valued at approximately £3 billion over a 99-year lease, has been framed by the UK government as a necessary step to ensure the continued usability of this critical facility in the face of growing international legal scrutiny.

The push for decolonization of the Chagos Islands aligns with longstanding international pressure, particularly following a 2019 advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice asserting that the UK's detachment of the islands from Mauritius was unlawful. Defence Secretary John Healey has asserted that without this deal, legal challenges could potentially disrupt military operations at Diego Garcia, making the base "inoperable" and thereby compromising UK security. He highlighted the potential repercussions for satellite communications and logistics if the base were no longer sustainably managed amid legal disputes.

Despite these reassurances, dissenting voices, including some within the Conservative Party and various foreign diplomats, caution against what they perceive as an exaggerated legal threat. Critics contend that the government is overly reliant on legal interpretations that may not materialize into serious challenges. Shadow Defence Secretary James Cartlidge articulated these concerns, accusing officials of acting based on hypothetical risks rather than concrete realities.

Furthermore, the geopolitical context plays a significant role in this decision. The UK government has claimed that without an agreement securing sovereignty for Mauritius, there is a risk that China could gain a foothold in the islands, potentially leading to increased competition and tension in an already volatile region. Officials argue that the agreement includes "veto" powers over any foreign military presence, ostensibly preventing such developments from occurring. Critics, however, question the feasibility of these assurances, noting that the Mauritian government might still cultivate deeper ties with China, regardless of treaty terms.

From a diplomatic standpoint, this agreement is portrayed as a necessary measure to bolster the UK's credibility in international law. UK ministers have pointed to the contradiction of advocating for international norms while simultaneously defying them in the case of the Chagos Islands. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres welcomed the agreement, remarking on its diplomatic significance in addressing historical grievances. However, some opponents suggest that this perspective fails to account for current international dynamics, where power often trumps adherence to legal obligations. They question whether major powers like the US or France would willingly relinquish territories under similar circumstances.

The backdrop of historical injustices remains pertinent, as many Chagossians and their descendants express dissatisfaction with the process, citing exclusion from negotiations and ongoing legal challenges regarding their rights. This has raised questions about the adequacy of provisions for resettlement and representation in future discussions, contributing to a narrative that the agreement fails to address the rights and realities of affected communities.

As the UK Parliament prepares to ratify this agreement, the balance of support may tilt in favour of the government due to its existing majority. Yet, the long-term implications of this decision—both on local communities and international relationships—remain to be fully realised. The government's position will be rigorously scrutinised in the coming weeks as it attempts to solidify a stance that encompasses both historical justice and contemporary security priorities.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3
3. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4
4. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4
5. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4
6. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3
7. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp3ql9k3vdqo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-set-sign-deal-ceding-sovereignty-chagos-islands-mauritius-2025-05-22/> - On May 22, 2025, the UK signed an agreement with Mauritius to cede sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, securing the future operation of the joint US-UK military base on Diego Garcia. The deal, valued at £3 billion over a 99-year lease with an optional 50-year extension, ensures the base remains under British operational control despite the sovereignty transfer. This decision follows a UK High Court ruling overturning an injunction from a Chagossian-born British national opposing the deal due to the exclusion of Chagossians from negotiations. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer emphasized the strategic importance of the Diego Garcia base for global security operations, including counter-terrorism missions. While Mauritius views the deal as the completion of its decolonization process, political opposition in the UK criticizes it for being expensive and potentially enhancing China's influence in the region. The agreement also serves to stabilize US-UK security cooperation, with endorsement from US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/b6f02636c9bc858a06926090d1a8cb5c> - On May 22, 2025, the United Kingdom signed an agreement to transfer sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, while retaining long-term access to the critical U.S.-U.K. military base on Diego Garcia. Under the deal, the U.K. will pay Mauritius £101 million ($136 million) annually to lease the base for at least 99 years. Prime Minister Keir Starmer defended the agreement as crucial for British national security, citing the base’s importance in counterterrorism and intelligence operations. The deal includes provisions maintaining a 24-mile exclusion zone around Diego Garcia, a U.K. veto over development on the islands, and a ban on foreign military presence. While the United Nations and International Court of Justice previously urged the U.K. to return the islands, domestic critics including displaced Chagossians and some British politicians condemned the move. The deal's signing was briefly delayed by a legal injunction but eventually proceeded. Critics argue the transfer undermines British interests and fails to guarantee resettlement rights for evicted islanders. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio welcomed the agreement, emphasizing its role in sustaining Diego Garcia’s strategic operations.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/2402978e-cf62-4a1e-8a0c-8bb85af85d8c> - The UK has signed a treaty with Mauritius transferring sovereignty of the Chagos Islands in exchange for securing long-term use of the Diego Garcia military base. Under the deal, Britain will pay Mauritius an average of £101 million annually, with an initial payment of £165 million per year, later reducing and adjusted for inflation, totaling a net present value of £3.4 billion. The agreement ensures continued US-UK military operations on Diego Garcia for at least the next century. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer emphasized the base's critical role in regional security and claimed the pact prevents international legal challenges. The deal includes provisions to block foreign military access, particularly targeting China. The Conservative Party criticized the treaty's terms and costs, accusing the Labour government of undermining national sovereignty. The agreement gained support from the US and other Five Eyes allies, while China, Russia, and Iran opposed it. A UK High Court injunction briefly delayed the signing following a last-minute legal challenge by Chagossian citizens, which was ultimately dismissed. Mauritian Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam celebrated the deal as a milestone in decolonization.
5. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-05-22/el-reino-unido-pone-fin-a-una-disputa-de-medio-siglo-al-entregar-a-mauricio-el-archipiélago-de-chagos.html> - El Reino Unido ha firmado un acuerdo histórico para devolver a Mauricio la soberanía del archipiélago de Chagos, poniendo fin a una disputa de más de medio siglo. A cambio, Reino Unido y Estados Unidos conservarán el control de la estratégica base militar en la isla Diego García por 99 años mediante un contrato de arrendamiento valorado en más de 4.000 millones de euros. Este enclave ha sido clave militarmente, especialmente durante las guerras de Afganistán e Irak, y sigue siendo importante para la seguridad internacional. La decisión, aunque apoyada por aliados como Canadá, Australia y Nueva Zelanda, generó críticas internas en el Reino Unido, tanto por el alto costo como por las preocupaciones sociales. Además, hubo resistencia legal por parte de algunos chagosianos, como Bertrice Pompe, que se oponen a perder su vínculo británico. Históricamente, los chagosianos fueron expulsados por Reino Unido en 1966 para permitir la instalación de la base estadounidense. La Asamblea General de la ONU y el Tribunal Internacional de Justicia ya habían instado en 2019 a la devolución del archipiélago a Mauricio, declarando ilegal su retención. A pesar de divisiones dentro de la comunidad chagosiana, la transferencia de soberanía se ha concretado.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/81d046b333b0af81489ed75543f9534b> - The United Kingdom and Mauritius have finalized a historic deal to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, excluding Diego Garcia, which will remain under British control due to its crucial U.S. military base. The archipelago, located in the Indian Ocean, has been under British rule since 1814. The deal faced delays due to legal and political obstacles, including a change in Mauritius' government and U.S. concerns over security implications. While former President Biden supported the deal, former President Trump later approved a renegotiated version in principle. The final agreement includes the U.K. paying Mauritius £101 million ($136 million) annually to lease back Diego Garcia for at least 99 years and must be ratified by the British Parliament. The deal acknowledges long-standing international criticism of Britain's eviction of around 2,000 Chagossians in the 1960s-70s to enable the U.S. military presence. Human rights groups have labeled the removals as crimes against humanity. However, many of the displaced and their descendants remain uncertain about their right to return, and a resettlement fund has been proposed, yet its implementation remains unclear. Legal challenges from Chagossian representatives continue as concerns grow over their exclusion from negotiations and potential barriers to resettlement post-transfer.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/key-facts-about-chagos-islands-deal-to-be-signed-by-uk-mauritius-2025-05-22/> - The UK is set to sign a multi-billion dollar agreement with Mauritius regarding the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, following the overturning of a last-minute legal injunction. The Chagos Archipelago, comprising over 600 islands in the Indian Ocean, has been a source of contention since Britain forcibly displaced nearly 2,000 Chagossians in the 1960s and 70s to establish a U.S.-UK military base on Diego Garcia. The new deal, initially agreed in October, involves Britain transferring sovereignty to Mauritius in exchange for a $4 billion payment, while retaining control of Diego Garcia through a 99-year lease. The base holds strategic military importance for both the UK and the U.S., hosting operations from the War in Afghanistan to recent deployments in Yemen and Gaza. The UN’s International Court of Justice declared Britain’s 1965 detachment of the islands from Mauritius unlawful, increasing international pressure. However, the agreement has drawn criticism from displaced Chagossians, UK opposition leaders, and the new Mauritian Prime Minister for lack of consultation and national interest concerns. The deal proceeds with U.S. support, despite warnings from Secretary of State Marco Rubio about regional security threats, especially from China’s influence.