

Navy Base in Diego Garcia Welcome to Stay After Transfer of Sovereignty, Official Says



Logistics Specialist 1st Class Joanna Caldwell, the officer of the deck, and Master-at-Arms 2nd Class James Wilson raise the ensign at Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia on June 4. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Carlos W. Hopper

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy base in Diego Garcia, an outpost in the Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean, would be welcome to remain if Mauritius succeeds in its sovereignty claim over the archipelago, currently known as the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT), a Mauritian official said.

Diego Garcia, located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, hosts an air and naval base that have been strategically important to U.S. military operations in the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia since the mid-1970s.

The Chagos archipelago in which Diego Garcia is located has been claimed by the United Kingdom, which in 1965 moved the Chagocian population from the islands to Mauritius and the Seychelles. Mauritius, an island group to the southwest between the Chagos and Madagascar, disputes the sovereignty over the Chagos by the U.K. The British have claimed the islands since 1814.

Speaking in a June 24 online discussion sponsored by Arlington, Virginia-based think tank CNA, Ambassador Jagdish Koonjul, the permanent representative of Mauritius to the United Nations, said the UN's International Court of

Justice (ICJ) declared in February 2019 that the Chagos Archipelago “is and always has been an integral part of Mauritius.”

Last May, the UN General Assembly voted 116-6 in favor of the Chagos being returned to Mauritius. The ICJ gave the British until last November to withdraw, which did not occur.

The British partitioned the Chagos from Mauritius in 1965 when the U.K. purchased the Chagos for 3 million pounds. Mauritius claimed the separation was forced in order for Mauritius to gain its independence from Britain, finalized in 1968.

The U.S. has a lease on the facilities there until 2036. Koonjul said Mauritius would propose a 99-year lease for the U.S. to retain the facility and would even allow the British to maintain facilities there if such an agreement were reached. But he said the current impasse is unsustainable.

As part of an agreement, Mauritius would insist that any Chagocians wishing to re-locate back to the Chagos be allowed to do so, excluding Diego Garcia, but that Mauritians and Chagocians be allowed to seek employment on Diego Garcia.

Koonjul noted that Mauritius favors the stability that the U.S. base brings to the Indian Ocean and that, as a close partner of India, it favors the increasingly close defense relationship of the United States with India.

“Mauritius stands ready to be a reliable partner to the United States,” Koonjul said.

Also speaking in the discussion was Mark Rosen, senior vice president and general counsel for CNA, who said that Diego Garcia was “already developed” and “very precious from a logistics standpoint” and that its isolation from civilian

populations gave it "more operational freedom."

Rosen said the United Kingdom's position has substantially weakened" in light of the ICJ decision and UN resolution and that the "political optics" for Britain were "not good" in an era of anti-colonialism.

He said that time is not on the side of the United States and the U.K. and that the U.S. needs to be proactive in seizing the opportunity to resolve the impasse.

Koonjul said that Mauritius has "no objection whatsoever to the U.S. base in Diego Garcia. ... The importance of the base cannot be underestimated."

He stressed the endurance of an agreement between the U.S. and Mauritius in that all Mauritian political parties support the base in Diego Garcia.

By an earlier agreement, the United States is not allowed to base nuclear weapons in Diego Garcia, although nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered ships are allowed in and out of the port facilities.