A Chinese delegation headed by Wang Chen, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, visited Mauritius from June 8-11, 2019 for a meeting with the country’s Prime Minister, Pravind Jugnauth, and acting President, Barlen Vyapoory. Readers will remember that in June 2018 Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the island.

There is little cause to be surprised about these visits from China. It is no coincidence that the talks covered one problem that has been much discussed by media around the world in recent months: the expulsion from their homeland of the Chagossians and their numerous appeals to the international community for assistance.

It looks as if China has an interest in good relations with Mauritius. That country occupies a strategically important location on the route from Asia to Africa, a continent where Beijing has long followed a successful policy of building up a wide variety of links. It also has an important role to play in the implementation of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and of China’s wider strategy in the Indian Ocean region.

The controversy relating to the Chagos Archipelago dates back to 1965, when Britain illegally seized the islands. In 1968 it forcefully and cruelly expelled the island’s native people in order to lease the largest of the islands, Diego Garcia, to the USA for use as a multi-purpose military base in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The base was a real poke in the eye for China and an obstacle to its strategy in the Indian Ocean, and many other countries shared China’s feelings.

These events were the beginning of the Chagossians’ long and tragic fight to return to their homeland - a fight which
has been continuing for more than 5 decades. To justify the myth of a “desert island”, invented by Britain and the USA and foisted on the rest of the world, Britain expelled the Chagossians to the Seychelles and Mauritius, depriving them of their work, their homes, and their means of supporting themselves. The British government has budgeted considerable sums of money in compensation, but, for some reason - maybe it was sent to the wrong people, or maybe the payments just stopped - very little of it reached its intended beneficiaries. According to lawyers representing them, by 1974, after 5 years of exile, a number of the Chagossians had died, unable to cope with life in such unsettled circumstances. Many of the exiles suffered from hunger and were living in ramshackle shanty-towns, and some, with no other hope in sight, became alcoholics or drug addicts, and the locals looked down on them as second-class citizens.

Since 1973 they have brought a number of legal challenges, addressed to the British government, Parliament and the Supreme Court, and have appealed for help to the European Parliament, the African Union, and the 1982 UN International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, among other bodies. They have also appealed to US government authorities, but with no success. To cite just one example, when some of the Chagossians brought an action against Robert McNamara, the US Minister of Defense at the time of the expulsions, the Columbia District Court refused to consider the case on the grounds that it was “politically motivated”. Nevertheless, the Chagossians’ pleas have reached the ears of three Nobel laureates, and dozens of British MPs. In 2005 they brought a claim in the European Court of human Rights, which found in their favor. But in 2010, in a clear attempt to defraud the Chagossians, London announced the creation of a Maritime Protection Zone around the archipelago, where no fishing would be permitted and human activities would be greatly limited. As a result, the Chagossians would not be able to do anything there if they returned.

The British authorities have continued to deny that there was anything illegal about their treatment of the Chagossians, rather hypocritically citing the fact that they had given British citizenship to several hundred of them and provided them with homes in Crawley.

However, it is impossible to accuse British society - or the British government - en masse of hypocrisy on this issue: a number of civil servants, and even the Foreign Secretary, have made some form of apology for what was done to the Chagossians, but have nevertheless cynically opposed the exiles’ right to return home. A number of commenters in the press have also expressed regrets, for example, the well-known British television presenter and journalist Ben Fogle wrote in his column in the Daily Telegraph: “What we have done to the Chagossians makes me ashamed to be British.” There have been a number of hunger strikes and pickets in support of the Chagossians. June 8, 2019 saw the screening of a new documentary film, Another Paradise, about the Chagossians’ destinies and their struggle to return to their homeland. The filmmakers hope to show the film at the Sheffield Film Festival, and then release it worldwide. Ironically, the film's title echoes the words of Mark Twain, who was enchanted with the wonderful scenery in Mauritius: “Mauritius was made first, and then heaven; and heaven was copied after Mauritius”. A paradise it may be, but, for the Chagossians, it is clearly a paradise lost.

Now their fight to return to their homes on Chagos has reached its decisive stage: On February 26, 2019 the International Court of Justice in the Hague ruled that London should return the islands to Mauritius. And not for the first time. In 2018 the USA and Britain went to that same court in an attempt to gain India’s support for their position: they were met with a firm refusal, and were provided with convincing legal evidence that the islands belong to Mauritius, and that returning them will enable Mauritius to move on from its colonial past and to respect the Chagossians’ rights to self-determination.

In view of the 2019 decision, Mauritius has applied to the UN General Assembly for help. Behind the scenes at the UN, on the day before the vote, Karen Pierce, Britain’s Permanent Representative rather hypocritically talked about how expensive the Chagossians’ return would be for British taxpayers. In fact, in the 1980s the international auditing company KPMG did an assessment of the cost for the Foreign Office, concluding that the repatriation would cost the British Treasury £66 million, not a huge amount for such a country.

The Chagos issue had generated such strong feelings, that Mauritius’ representative to the UN quite reasonably hoped to get the support of more than 100 member states. Although, during the talks, Mauritius tried to resolve the issue and offered to give London and Washington a long lease over the islands, they refused the offer on the grounds that in the future Mauritius would still be able to veto any military operations, and to lease other atolls to other powers, including China, (which as mentioned above, has shown interest in the islands).

On May 22, 2019 the UN General Assembly approved a resolution recommending London to return the Chagos Islands to Mauritius within 6 months: 116 countries voted in favor, 56 countries (including major countries such as
France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal etc) abstained, and 6 countries (including Britain, the USA and Australia) voted against. Taken aback by the decision, and arguing against it, Karen Pierce (who, like many of her colleagues, is a high-ranking diplomat) made a rather clumsy attempt to justify London’s position, claiming that this tiny relic of the British Empire played an important role in the fight against piracy, international crime and in guaranteeing security in the region. In short, her conduct served to remind the world of one of the many occasions in the 20th century when major world powers have ridden roughshod over the rights of minority ethnic groups in pursuit of their own strategic goals (something Russophobes from the West have accused Russia of on more than one occasion in relation to the Crimea): Bikini, Enewetak, Fangataufa, and Mururoa, atolls in the Pacific Ocean, the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic etc.

Will the UN General Assembly’s resolution on the Chagos Islands have any international consequences?

To understand the real reasons behind Britain’s (and her backer, America’s) negative response, it is enough to look at a map of the world: the Diego Garcia base (an atoll in the Chagos archipelago) allows its holder to keep a number of regions in its sights, including the South China Sea, South and South East Asia, the always-tense Persian Gulf, and Middle East, and East Africa. The USA has more than once made use of its unique central location: in the first Gulf War, in Afghanistan, in the Iraq War etc. And, without wanting to repeat what has often been said before, the Pentagon has turned Diego Garcia into a hiding place for military secrets that, in these days of satellite photography, can no longer be hidden from the world. There is a whole underwater city-sized store of ammunition, rockets, bombs - including nuclear bombs, there is a giant aerodrome for B-2 and B-52 bombers able to fly on super-long-range missions, there are Boeing airliners and cargo planes, and wharves and docks for warships and submarines. And, fairly recently, information appeared from a number of sources, suggesting that the USA may well be using this site, so far from unwanted observers, to conduct secret research into chemical and biological weapons. The base is of great importance in controlling the massive shipments of oil from the Middle East to South Asia, South East Asia and North America, and in containing China’s military expansion and countering the presence of its submarines in the Indian Ocean. From this base it is possible to listen in on the movements of all the vessels in the region. The island is also home to one of a group of high-tech monitoring stations that form part of the GPS system, with others on Hawaii, Kwajalein Atoll, and Colorado Springs. When global military and strategic interests of that nature are at stake, the USA will have no problem ignoring principles of morality and international law, or recommendations from the UN General Assembly, and nothing will make it give up what is the most valuable military base in the world. After all, when questioned about the islands’ future in a recent interview, the current incumbent of the White House suggested building a hotel there.

One conclusion is unavoidable, however: the UN General Assembly’s vote on May 22, 2019 was a political and diplomatic defeat, and something of a psychological shock, for Washington and London, and a serious blow to their customary status as UN hegemons.

Professor David Vine, author of a number of books on the lives and problems of the Chagossians, has described the Diego Garcia base (and the 800 other US bases scattered around the world) as America’s “national shame”.

Britain has also been referred to as a “colonial power 2.0”.

The destiny of the exiled Chagossians, and their descendants, remains a tragic one, and, without any effective support from the international community, they still have little chance of returning to their homeland.

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