

Starmer agrees deal to deport migrants to South Atlantic like UK Conservatives' Rwanda plan

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Last month, the Labour government announced it had reached an agreement to deport any migrants arriving in the Chagos Islands in the British Indian Ocean territories (BIOT) to St Helena, an island in the South Atlantic 5,000 miles from the UK.

The deal is a carbon copy of the Conservative government's infamous plan to deport migrants to Rwanda, which Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer cancelled in July on his first day in office, calling it "completely wrong" and "immoral".

Any future arrivals to the Chagos Islands—of which Diego Garcia is the largest and most well-known as it houses a crucial UK-US military base—before the islands' transfer of sovereignty to Mauritius next year, would not be admitted to the UK. Instead, they would be given the choice of returning to their countries of origin or being transferred to Saint Helena. Starmer has agreed to provide £6.65 million to Saint Helena in return.

Stephen Doughty, the Foreign Office minister responsible for Britain's 15 overseas territories said the arrangement with St Helena was an "interim contingency solution" pending the handover of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. He insisted that there was "no comparison" between Labour's deal with Saint Helena and the Tory government's infamous scheme.

He added, "Let me reiterate, however, that no migrants have arrived on BIOT since 2022. This is a contingency arrangement that is absolutely necessary, but of course we hope that no one will choose to take such a dangerous route." That the government could take such extreme measures for what it admits is a highly unlikely event and one that has involved just a handful of people in the past shows the lengths to which it is prepared to go to block entry to Britain.

The Labour government is taking its cue from Priti Patel, the Conservative home secretary well-known for her hardline views on immigration, who in 2020 asked officials to explore the construction of an immigration centre on Ascension Island—another South Atlantic island halfway between Angola and Brazil, as well as St Helena, Moldova, Morocco and Papua New Guinea—as different options for "offshoring" asylum seekers.

The proposal was inspired by the Australian government's controversial use of the island of Nauru to house asylum seekers. It follows the British government's reluctant decision announced last month, after six decades of acrimonious legal battles, to hand over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. The British government had illegally separated the Chagos Islands from Mauritius before granting it independence in 1968 and expelled the Islands' inhabitants from their homes to lease Diego Garcia to the US. The strategically located base, halfway between India and East Africa, serves as a surveillance centre for the Middle East and played a crucial role in US imperialism's wars in the Middle East and Asia as well as providing a "dark site" where the CIA detained and tortured people and refueled extraordinary rendition flights.

The decision to surrender sovereignty came six years after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion noting that "the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed" and that the UK had violated United Nations resolutions prohibiting the breaking up of colonies before granting independence.

The international opprobrium the UK faced for ignoring the ICJ's decision and its treatment of the Chagossians, whom successive governments refused to allow to return to their homes even as they lived in impoverished conditions in Britain, the Seychelles and elsewhere, finally forced the incoming Labour government to agree to a rotten, face-saving deal with Mauritius. It would retain control of Diego Garcia—and the UK-US base—under a renewable 99-year lease.

The deal did nothing to address the right of return of the Chagossians to Diego Garcia, where most of them had lived. But neither did it address the plight of around 70 Tamil asylum seekers stranded on the island.

In 2021, 89 Tamils, including 16 children, who had fled torture and racist persecution in Sri Lanka, had been trying to reach Canada when their fishing boat ran into trouble. They were rescued by the Royal Navy and brought to Diego Garcia, where they have remained ever since trying to seek asylum in Britain.

In 2022, four further boats carrying asylum seekers reached

the island, some of whom were allowed to leave and succeeded in reaching the French territory of Reunion. The conditions in the camp were so dire that a number returned. Others were deported back to Sri Lanka. While some of the migrants were sent to Rwanda for medical treatment, they were later returned to Diego Garcia.

In late 2022, Paul Candler, BIOT's then-commissioner based in London, changed the law to allow the Tamil asylum seekers to be forcibly transported to countries other than their country of origin. He said, "If my decision is that you cannot be safely returned to Sri Lanka, the policy of the UK government is that you will not be taken to the UK. The law of the British Indian Ocean Territory is being changed to allow us to take you to a safe third country instead." But the UK was unable to find another country to accept them.

The Tamils have spent the last three years living in what amounts to a concentration camp, locked in a legal limbo and held in virtual incommunicado 1,000 miles away from the nearest landmass in India, unable to resolve their legal status. Living in rat-infested, communal tents, they have been confined to a small fenced-in area, no bigger than a football pitch, under the watchful eyes of G4S, a security firm, who "are treating us like prisoners," according to anonymous statements by two of the asylum seekers. According to the BBC, there have been "multiple suicide attempts" and "reports of sexual harassment and assaults." Lawyers say that there have been hunger strikes, including by children.

Their plight has been compounded by the fact that access to Diego Garcia is restricted to those with connections to the military or BIOT's administration. There are no commercial flights to the island and access for yachts is only for safe passage through the outer Chagos Islands.

In November last year, the UN's High Commission for Refugees visited the island, and wrote a damning report about the camp. It concluded that "conditions there amounted to arbitrary detention" and called for the Tamils' "immediate relocation." The British Foreign Office, which administers the BIOT, admitted the conditions were not suitable. Nevertheless, last July, Washington blocked a BIOT court from entering Diego Garcia thereby preventing the remaining Tamil migrants from presenting their case that they were being unlawfully detained.

Having agreed to transfer the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, the Labour government's callous solution to the Tamils' plight was to transfer most of the asylum seekers to a transit centre in Romania for six months before allowing them to enter the UK. Others were offered financial incentives to return to Sri Lanka where they face persecution. In future, Mauritius would be responsible for any future migrants arriving on the islands, closing off the Indian Ocean as a migration route to the UK.

The Tamils rejected the offer, with their lawyers arguing that six months of detention in a Romanian facility with barred windows would be harmful to their vulnerable clients, forcing

the government to reverse its controversial plan and grudgingly allow most of the Tamils the chance to apply to enter the UK directly and seek asylum. This includes 56 on Diego Garcia and 8 who had been transferred to Rwanda for medical treatment, including 16 children.

The official readout said that the Tamils' entry to the UK will depend on "there being no adverse information found as a result" of clearance applications and biometrics that they will have to submit for review. Furthermore, "Entry to the UK will be for a short period of time, which will allow you to consider your next steps." It is not clear what will happen to at least three asylum seekers, who are being held in a "short-term holding facility" because of criminal convictions or ongoing criminal investigations and will not be allowed to request transfer to the UK.

There has been almost no reporting of the Tamils' case and their appalling treatment at the hands of the British government in the British press. There has similarly been little reporting of the government's intention of sending any future migrants to St Helena, or comment on its implications for future policy. This is because the flagrant attack on democratic rights is part of the Labour government's anti-immigration policy with which the corporate media largely agrees.

By mid-October, the authorities had returned at least 3,600 people to various countries, including about 200 to Brazil and 46 to Vietnam and Timor-Leste, in the two months following the Labour government's return to power in July.

The British ruling class has de facto repudiated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, that includes the right to equality and liberty as well as the right to asylum. It is part of a broader attack on democratic rights of the entire working class, including the massive expansion of the police powers of the state.

Workers must come to the defence of immigrants, asylum seekers and basic democratic rights. Reactionary precedents are being set that will be used against workers and youth more broadly as opposition grows to the worsening social crisis and escalating wars.



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