

British colonialism meets PNAC

by Liliana Segura via reed - Alternet *Tuesday, Mar 11 2008, 11:29pm*

international / imperialism / other press

Sordid Details on 'Black Site' at Diego Garcia Island Come to Light

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband issued an embarrassing apology to members of Parliament last month. Despite "earlier explicit assurances" to the contrary, he admitted, two planes carrying prisoners of the U.S. "war on terror" had landed on the British-owned island of Diego Garcia in 2002 before flying to foreign territory as part of the American extraordinary rendition program.



Airstrip -- Diego Garcia

One flight went on to Guantánamo, one to Morocco. The identities of the detainees remain classified, but one of them has since been set free. According to the CIA, neither was tortured. But -- Miliband would have the public believe -- the CIA didn't bother to tell the British government that its territory was being used as a landing pad for American torture taxis.

Human rights attorneys and a handful of British MPs have long raised the possibility that Diego Garcia, a small island in the Indian Ocean that is home to a massive American military base, has played a role in extraordinary rendition -- and that it is among the United States' "black sites" -- secret CIA-run prisons, the existence of which President Bush himself confirmed in 2006. Even loose-lipped American officials have acknowledged it. As London-based human rights attorney Clive Stafford Smith, director of the legal organization Reprieve (which, over a year ago, unearthed flight logs recording the arrival and departure of a CIA rendition plane at Diego Garcia), wrote in the Guardian last January:

British denials are difficult to square with the words of U.S. Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey ... recently retired from running Southcom, the military command that oversees Guantánamo. He was asked in May 2004 where the thousands of ghost prisoners were being held. "You know, Bagram Air Field, Diego Garcia, Guantánamo, 16 camps throughout Iraq," he replied.

Yet the Blair and Brown administrations continually denied it. Until now.

"We have just been informed by the United States of America about what has actually happened," Prime Minister Gordon Brown told reporters lamely on Feb. 21. "The U.S. has expressed regret for

us not knowing about this issue. We share the disappointment that everybody has about what's actually happened."

In the States, the controversy has gotten little press -- in no small part because Americans have known for years that their elected officials are in the kidnap/torture business. But in Britain, where the government has denied any role in their ally's unsavory program, officials are pleading ignorance, offering insipid excuses and, ultimately, trying to reduce proof of their complicity with the U.S. torture/detention machinery to a mere bureaucratic oversight. As Brown tells it, this was simply a case where an "error in the earlier U.S. records search meant that these cases did not come to light."

Nevertheless, the Guardian reported on Monday, "Ministers are coming under growing pressure as officials made it clear they still could not be certain of the extent to which U.S. aircraft made use of British facilities when taking alleged terrorists to prisons where they were likely to be subjected to inhumane treatment."

Regardless of what comes to light, the case of Diego Garcia is uniquely instructive in what it has revealed of American and British collusion in the past. Long before the "war on terror," the story of Diego Garcia was a tragic symbol of imperial aggression.

As the British journalist John Pilger wrote in his book *Freedom Next Time*, "The story of Diego Garcia is shocking, almost incredible."

A British colony lying midway between Africa and Asia in the Indian Ocean, the island is one of 64 unique coral islands that form the Chagos Archipelago, a phenomenon of natural beauty and once of peace. Newsreaders refer to it in passing: "American B-52 and stealth bombers last night took off from the uninhabited British island of Diego Garcia to bomb Iraq (or Afghanistan)." It is the word "uninhabited" that turns the key on the horror of what was done there. In the 1970s, the Ministry of Defense in London produced this epic lie: "There is nothing in our files about a population and an evacuation."

Pilger tells the awful story of an island that, at the height of the Cold War, was seized by the British, and with the help of the American government, "swept" and "sanitized." This involved taking a population of natives and, retroactively, reclassifying them as "short-term, temporary residents" that were "returned" to the island of Mauritius, about 1,000 miles away. "In fact," writes Pilger, "many islanders traced their ancestry back five generations, as their cemeteries bore witness."

Rendered disposable, the population of 2,000 was forcibly removed and eventually replaced by American troops: Diego Garcia was leased to the United States free of charge following a secret pact between British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and U.S. President Lyndon Johnson. They inhabit a military base that's now one of the world's largest. The name: "Camp Justice."

Years later, the start of the "war on terror" coincided with a number of significant -- and hideously overdue -- developments for the people of Diego Garcia. In 2000, the British high court ruled the forced removal of the islanders illegal. But, reported Pilger, "within hours of the judgment, the Foreign Office announced that it would not be possible for them to return to Diego Garcia because of a 'treaty' with Washington -- in truth, a deal concealed from Parliament and the U.S. Congress."

In 2003, at the same time that extraordinary rendition flights were carrying detainees to be tortured, a second ruling denied compensation for the former residents of Diego Garcia. Adding brutal insult

to injury, the Blair government invoked the "royal prerogative" -- special executive powers that belong only to the king or queen -- to dispense with the earlier ruling -- and "a decree was issued that the islanders were banned forever from returning home."

Today, with Diego Garcia in the spotlight, official reports have tried to continue the fiction that the island never belonged to anyone. "Once uninhabited, it was turned into an air base to protect oil supplies to the West during the Cold War," wrote a reporter in the Gulf Times the day after Miliband's apology.

For their part, U.S. officials are taking responsibility for failing to tell the British about the flights in and out of Diego Garcia. "That we found this mistake ourselves, and that we brought it to the attention of the British government, in no way changes or excuses the reality that we were in the wrong," CIA Director Michael Hayden said. "An important part of intelligence work, inherently urgent, complex and uncertain, is to take responsibility for errors and to learn from them."

Perhaps. But if Diego Garcia's role in the war on terror is any indication, neither the U.S. nor the British government have learned from their mistakes. It is only the latest chapter in an epic story of imperial injustice.

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