

## Mauritius' New Government Rejects Diego Garcia Deal



The U.S. naval base and airfield at UK-administered Diego Garcia (NASA)

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The UK Government's chief negotiator, Jonathan Powell, made an emergency trip to Mauritius last week in an attempt to salvage the draft deal to surrender sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. The incoming and newly-elected government of Mauritius had rejected the draft agreement, which it inherited from the previous government of Pravind Jugnauth.

Incoming Mauritian Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolamed described the draft deal as having failed to deliver 'the benefits that the nation could expect from such an agreement'. On his visit, Jonathan Powell submitted an updated proposal, which the Mauritian government is now considering, and which potentially could increase the amount of money offered to Mauritius. Press speculation in the United Kingdom is that the deal may now be dead.

Since the surprise revelation in September that negotiations for a deal had been re-opened and a draft agreement reached, opposition to the deal in the United Kingdom has hardened. Critics of the deal suggest that it will provide a back door to Chinese interference with the U.S. naval base at Diego Garcia, and have claimed that opposition to continued British sovereignty in the United Nations General Assembly had been orchestrated by the Russians and Chinese to suit their interests.

There were also concerns that the Chagos Islanders were losing their British citizenship and being transferred to Mauritius without having been consulted, leading for calls amongst Chagos Islanders for a referendum on the matter - similar to those that have taken place amongst Falkland Islanders and Gibraltarians. Islanders are also pressing to be allowed to reoccupy one of the outer islands in the Chagos Archipelago, and have sought to remain British citizens, fearing discriminatory treatment by the Mauritian authorities.

The United Kingdom has owned Diego Garcia within the Chagos Archipelago since 1814, and had hitherto rebuffed attempts by Mauritius to assert that the archipelago should have been transferred to Mauritius when it gained independence from Britain in 1968. The United Kingdom has leased the island of Diego Garcia to the United States for its exclusive use as a military base since 1966. The lease runs without break clause until 2036, with a renewal option thereafter.

The United States maintains a secure major airfield on Diego Garcia, as well as a naval support base that can host a full range of naval vessels from nuclear submarines to aircraft carriers. The protected lagoon is used as an anchorage for ships of MPS Ships Squadron Two, a strategic logistic reserve kept afloat and ready for use by US Marines and the US Army in the Middle East region should the need arise. At such times, the airfield becomes a key base for long-range strike and reconnaissance aircraft.

Press reports suggest that the incoming Trump administration is opposed to the draft deal, and there is speculation that the British government will attempt to force an agreement through on revised terms before the presidential inauguration on January 20.