

How the Pentagon Removes Entire Peoples

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[War is a Crime](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

If we think at all about our government's military depopulating territory that it desires, we usually think of the long-ago [replacement](#) of native Americans with new settlements during the continental expansion of the United States westward.

Here in Virginia some of us are vaguely aware that back during the Great Depression poor people were [evicted](#) from their homes and their land where national parks were desired. But we distract and comfort ourselves with the notion that such matters are deep in the past.

Occasionally we notice that environmental [disasters](#) are displacing people, often poor people or marginalized people, from their homes. But these incidents seem like collateral damage rather than intentional ethnic cleansing.

If we're aware of the 1,000 or so U.S. military [bases](#) standing today in some 175 foreign countries, we must realize that the land they occupy could serve some other purpose in the lives of those countries' peoples. But surely those countries' peoples are still there, still living — if perhaps slightly inconvenienced — in their countries.

Yet the fact is that the U.S. military has displaced and continues to displace for the construction of its bases the entire populations of villages and islands, in blatant violation of international law, basic human decency, and principles we like to tell each other we stand for. The United States also continues to deny displaced populations the right to return to their homelands.

At issue here are not the bombings or burnings of entire villages, which of course the United States engages in during its [wars](#) and its [non-wars](#). Nor are we dealing here with the millions of refugees created by wars like those in Iraq and Afghanistan or by drone wars like the one in Pakistan. Rather, the following are cases of the intentional displacement of particular populations moved out of the way of base construction and left alive to struggle as refugees in exile.

In the Philippines, the United States built bases on land belonging to the indigenous Aetas people, who "ended up combing military trash to [survive](#)."

During World War II the U.S. Navy seized the small Hawaiian island of Koho'alawe for a weapons testing range and ordered its inhabitants to leave. The island has been [devastated](#).

In 1942, the Navy displaced Aleutian Islanders.

President Harry Truman made up his mind that the 170 native inhabitants of Bikini Atoll had

no right to their island. He had them evicted in February and March of 1946, and dumped as refugees on other islands without means of support or a social structure in place. In the coming years, the United States would remove 147 people from Enewetak Atoll and all the people on Lib Island. U.S. atomic and hydrogen bomb testing rendered various depopulated and still-populated islands uninhabitable, leading to further displacements. Up through the 1960s, the U.S. military displaced hundreds of people from Kwajalein Atoll. A super-densely populated ghetto was created on Ebeye.

On [Vieques](#), off Puerto Rico, the Navy displaced thousands of inhabitants between 1941 and 1947, announced plans to evict the remaining 8,000 in 1961, but was forced to back off and — in 2003 — to stop bombing the island.

On nearby Culebra, the Navy displaced thousands between 1948 and 1950 and attempted to remove those remaining up through the 1970s.

The Navy is right now looking at the island of [Pagan](#) as a possible replacement for Vieques, the population already having been removed by a volcanic eruption. Of course, any possibility of return would be greatly diminished.

Beginning during World War II and continuing through the 1950s, the U.S. military displaced a quarter million Okinawans, or half the population, from their land, forcing people into refugee camps and shipping thousands of them off to Bolivia — where land and money were promised but not delivered.

In 1953, the United States made a deal with Denmark to remove 150 Inughuit people from Thule, Greenland, giving them four days to get out or face bulldozers. They are being denied the right to return.

DIEGO GARCIA

The story of Diego Garcia is superbly told in David Vine's book, [Island of Shame](#). Between 1968 and 1973, the United States and Great Britain exiled all 1,500 to 2,000 inhabitants from this island in the Indian Ocean. On orders from, and with funding from, the United States, the British forced the people onto overcrowded ships and dumped them on docks in Mauritius and the Seychelles — foreign and distant and unwelcoming lands for this indigenous population that had been part of Diego Garcia for centuries. U.S. documents described this as “sweeping” and “sanitizing” the island.

Those responsible for the displacement of the people of Diego Garcia knew that what they were doing was widely considered barbaric and illegal. They devised ways of creating “logical cover” for the process. They persuaded the ever-compliant *Washington Post* to bury the story. The Queen of England and her Privy Council bypassed Parliament. The Pentagon lied to Congress and hid its payments to the British from Congress. The planners even lied to themselves. Having originally envisioned a communications station, they concluded that advances in technology had rendered that unhelpful. So, Navy schemers decided that a fueling station for ships might offer a “suitable justification” for building a base that was actually a purposeless end in itself. But the Pentagon ended up telling a reluctant Congress that the base would be a communications station, because that was something Congress would approve.

Those plotting the eviction of the island's people created the fiction that the inhabitants

were migrant workers not actually native to Diego Garcia. Sir Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under Secretary in the Foreign Office of the U.K., dismissed the island's people as "some few Tarzans or Men Fridays whose origins are obscure." This stood in contrast to the respect and protection given to some other islands not chosen for bases because of the rare plants, birds, and animals resident there.

On January 24, 1971, remaining inhabitants of Diego Garcia were told they'd need to leave or be shot. They were allowed to take a small box of possessions, but had to leave their homes, their gardens, their animals, their land, and their society. Their dogs were rounded up and killed in a gas chamber as they watched, waiting to themselves be loaded on ships for departure. Arriving in Mauritius, they were housed in a prison. Their fate has not much improved in the decades since. David Vine [describes](#) them as very forgiving, wishing nothing but to be permitted to return.

Diego Garcia is purely a military base and in some ways more of a lawless zone than Guantanamo. The United States has kept and may be keeping prisoners there, on the island or on ships in the harbor. The Red Cross and journalists do not visit. The United States has *de facto* control of Diego Garcia, while the U.K. has technical ownership. The Pentagon is not interested in allowing the island's people to return.

JEJU ISLAND

The South Korean government, at the behest of the U.S. Navy, is in the process of devastating a village, its coast, and 130 acres of farmland on Jeju Island with a massive military base. This story is best told in [Regis Tremblay's](#) new film [The Ghosts of Jeju](#). This is not a tragedy from the past to be remedied but a tragedy of this moment to be halted in its tracks. You [can help](#). Tremblay's film examines the history of decades of abuse of the people of Jeju, and the resistance movement that is currently inspiring other anti-base efforts around the globe. The film begins somber and ends joyful. I highly recommend creating an event around a screening of it.

PALESTINE

We should not neglect to note here that the United States [funds and arms and protects](#) the Israeli government's ongoing displacement of Palestinians and denial of the right to return.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past," wrote William Faulkner.

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