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David Vine: Island of Shame

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Rita felt like she'd been sliced open and all the blood spilled from her body.

"What happened to you? What happened to you?" her children cried as they came running to her side.

"What happened?" her husband inquired.

"Did someone attack you?" they asked.

"I heard everything they said," Rita recounted, "but my voice couldn't open my mouth to say what happened." For an hour she said nothing, her heart swollen with emotion.

Finally she blurted out: "We will never again return to our home! Our home has been closed!" As Rita told me almost forty years later, the man said to her: "Your island has been sold. You will never go there again."

Marie Rita Elysée Bancoult is one of the people of the Chagos Archipelago, a group of about 64 small coral islands near the isolated center of the Indian Ocean, halfway between Africa and Indonesia, 1,000 miles south of the nearest continental landmass, India. Known as Chagossians, none live in Chagos today. Most live 1,200 miles away on the western Indian Ocean islands of Mauritius and the Seychelles. Like others, 80-year-old Rita lives far from Mauritius's renowned tourist beaches and luxury hotels. Rita, or Aunt Rita as she is known, lives in one of the island's poorest neighborhoods, known for its industrial plants and brothels, in a small aging three-room house made of concrete block.

Rita and other Chagossians cannot return to their homeland because between 1968 and 1973, in a plot carefully hidden from the world, the United States and Great Britain exiled all 1,500–2,000 islanders to create a major U.S. military base on the Chagossians' island Diego Garcia. Initially, government agents told those like Rita who were away seeking medical treatment or vacationing in Mauritius that their islands had been closed and they could not go home. Next, British officials began restricting supplies to the islands and more Chagossians left as food and medicines dwindled. Finally, on the orders of the U.S. military, U.K. officials forced the remaining islanders to board overcrowded cargo ships and left them on the docks in Mauritius and the Seychelles. Just before the last deportations, British agents and U.S. troops on Diego Garcia herded the Chagossians' pet dogs into sealed sheds and gassed and burned them in front of their traumatized owners awaiting deportation.

