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Chagos Archipelago Dispute

Why in news?

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The British Foreign Secretary has sought Indian assistance in resolving current tensions in the U.S. military base Diego Garcia.

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What is the issue?

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- The Chagos Archipelago is a group of seven atolls comprising more than 60 islands in the Indian Ocean about 500 km south of the Maldives.

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- It had been part of Mauritius since the 18th century when the French first settled the islands.

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- All of the islands of French colonial territory in the region were ceded to the British in 1810.

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- Before Mauritian independence, in 1965, the UK split the archipelago from the territory of Mauritius to form the British Indian Ocean Territory and permitted the US to use it for defence purposes for 50 years (until December 2016) followed by a 20-year optional extension.

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- Following this US Military Base was setup in Diego Garcia, the largest of the islands.

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- 2,000 inhabitants were resettled in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

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- The UN resolutions banned the dismemberment of colonial territories before independence.

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- Therefore Mauritius claims sovereignty over the islands and states that Britain's claim is a violation of law and of UN resolutions.

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- The resettled inhabitants now number around 10,000 including their descendants and they wish to resettle.

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- UK declared Marine Protected Area around Chagos in 2010, which prohibits fishing and extractive industry and has the effect of preventing any resettlement.

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- In 2015, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled this move as illegal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

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- According to PCA, Mauritius holds legally binding rights\n

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1. to fish in the waters surrounding the Chagos.

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2. to the eventual return of the Chagos to Mauritius when no longer needed for defence purposes

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3. to the preservation of the benefit of any minerals or oil discovered in the Chagos Archipelago pending its eventual return

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- In November 2016, the U.K. ruled out the resettlement of the islanders on the grounds of feasibility, defence, security interests and the cost.

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- UK also renewed the lease for Diego Garcia with US, up until 2036.
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- Subsequently, Mauritius warned that it would push to take the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
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What is the recent move?

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- UK sees Diego Garcia as vital for its operations in the region.
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- Therefore it wants India to exercise its influence with the Mauritian government to help reach some agreement.
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- They believe that it would be in India's security interest in the region.
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- India has maintained that the matter of to proceed with ICJ is a decision for the Mauritian government to make.
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- But this is seen as a positive move, as it signals Britain's eagerness to partner with India on security matters.
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Source: The Hindu

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