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The U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Saratoga at Diego Garcia, Chagos Islands, circa 1985-87 (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Navy)



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ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM MADAGASCAR — September 10, 2019

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Pope Francis said Sept. 10 that the United States and the United Kingdom should respect a United Nations resolution calling on them to cede control of an Indian Ocean archipelago that includes the U.S. air base of Diego Garcia.

In a press conference aboard the papal flight back to Rome after his three-nation visit to Southern Africa, the pontiff said that when the U.N. makes determinations on international disputes, such as the various claims on the Chagos Islands, they should be adhered to.

"When we recognize international organizations, we give them the capacity to judge internationally," said the pope. "When they speak, if we are part of humanity, we must obey."

"It is true that it is not always the thing that seems just for all humanity or for our pockets, but you must obey the international institutions," he said. "This is why they were created."

Francis had been visiting Mozambique, Madagascar and Mauritius from Sept. 4 through 10. The Chagos Islands are an archipelago to the east of Mauritius, a former British colony.

The U.N. General Assembly voted overwhelmingly earlier this year to demand that the U.K., which held onto Chagos after granting Mauritius independence in 1968, end its "colonial administration" and return Chagos to Mauritius.



U.K. Royal Air Force personnel construct an open-air cinema at the air force base at Diego Garcia, circa 1941-45 (Wikimedia Commons/Imperial War Museum)

The U.K. has refused, saying its presence there is strategically important.

About 2,000 people were evicted from Chagos in the 1960s and 1970s so the U.S. military could build the Diego Garcia air base. Many have resettled in the U.K. and have fought in British and international courts to return to the islands.

Francis was queried about the claims on the Chagos Islands Sept. 10 by a Mauritian journalist, who asked how the pope could help Chagosians in their quest to return to their homeland.

The pontiff said that the U.N. and other international organizations were created for the purpose of resolving such disputes. "When there is some domestic fight, or between countries, you go there to resolve it, as brothers, as civilized people," he said.

The pope also said that he had noticed a "phenomenon" about the end of the colonial era, specifying that he was not speaking specifically about the Chagos Islands case.

Some colonial powers, he said, granted their colonies independence but held onto control of certain territories or land rights.

"There is always the temptation to keep something in your pocket," said Francis, giving the hypothetical example of a country that keeps mining rights in a former colony.

He suggested that the U.N. might develop a "process of accompaniment" for former colonial powers, "recognizing their good will to go, and helping them … so that they go completely, in friendship."

Francis was asked about the claims on the Chagos Islands during a 65-minute press conference in which he also warned that ideology is "infiltrating" the religious teaching of some quarters of the U.S. Catholic Church.

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