

# US deploys F-15 fighter jets to defend Indian Ocean outpost

BY BRENDAN COLE  
*Newsweek World*

U.S. Air Force F-15 fighter jets have been deployed to Diego Garcia to protect its assets on the Indian Ocean island, it has been reported.

A U.S. official told *Air & Space Forces Magazine* that the aircraft had been sent to the island to provide force protection, without specifying how many planes had been sent.

Military online magazine The War Zone said at least four of the aircraft had been sent to protect assets there, which include B-52H bombers.

*Newsweek* has contacted the Pentagon for comment.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Part of the British Indian Ocean Territory, Diego Garcia is a strategic operating location for the and U.K. and U.S. militaries.

It hosts Space Force operations and is a key port for U.S. Navy vessels, including nuclear submarines, and shelters a Sea-lift Command Prepositioning Ship Squadron.

TWZ reported the U.S. is stepping up its defense of the island amid a growing threat from Iran and its regional proxies, with Tehran commissioning vessels that can launch ballistic and cruise missiles as well as long-range kamikaze drones.

## WHAT TO KNOW

U.S. Air Force F-15 fighters were deployed to Diego Garcia to protect the assets there, CDR Matthew Comer, chief of media and current operations, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs, told the The War Zone.

The website cited an unnamed source as saying a contingent of at least four of the fighter jets had been sent to protect assets, which include B-52H bombers, five KC-135 tankers, a C-17 cargo plane and a white-colored airliner.

It said that satellite imagery taken on Friday showed the planes, although it was not clear whether they were F-15C/D Eagles, which the U.S. Air Force is steadily retiring, or F-15E Strike Eagles.

An unusually large force of six B-2 Spirit stealth bombers started arriving on the island in March. The aircraft subsequently conducted strikes on Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen, TWZ reported.

While the remoteness of the island was a natural barrier for adversaries, Iran has posed a growing threat in recent years with Tehran demonstrating missile and drone capabilities, including launchers in standard shipping containers.

U.S. Command paused its military campaign, Operation Rough Rider, against the Iranian-backed Houthis earlier this month.

The Houthis shot down several American MQ-9 Reaper drones and continued to fire at naval ships in the Red Sea, including an American aircraft carrier.

And the U.S. strikes burned through weapons and munitions at a rate of about \$1 billion in the first month alone.

It did not help that two \$67 million F/A-18 Super Hornets from America’s flagship aircraft carrier tasked with conducting strikes against the Houthis accidentally tumbled off the USS Harry S. Truman into the sea.

## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

**CDR Matthew Comer, spokesperson for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told The War Zone:** “The F-15s are deployed providing force protection.”

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

There are not many details about the deployment of the F-15s, but the U.S. appears to be protecting its military assets on Diego Garcia. President Donald Trump has left open the possibility of still using force against the Tehran-backed Houthis.

*The New York Times contributed to this report.*



LOREN ELLIOTT NYT

An elephant named Billy at the Los Angeles Zoo, in Los Angeles, May 16. Animal rights activists, including entertainer Cher, want Billy and the zoo’s other remaining elephant, Tina, to be relocated to an animal sanctuary instead of a zoo in Tulsa, Okla.

# Cher wants a better home for LA’s elephants. Not Tulsa.

BY JESUS JIMÉNEZ  
*NYT News Service*

For years, animal-rights advocates have pushed for the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo to be moved to an animal sanctuary.

But in Southern California, even the elephants have celebrity backers. One elephant in particular, Billy, has gotten some extra love from Cher.

“Billy doesn’t deserve this,” the singer said in an interview Thursday. She says the 40-year-old pachyderm, who has been at the zoo since 1989, “has had a terrible life” in a restrictive enclosure, with minimal shade and hard ground that could damage his feet.

In recent months, the legal, political and zoological drama playing out over the fate of the zoo’s Asian elephants has escalated. After two aging members of the herd had to be euthanized, zoo officials announced in April that Billy and the only other surviving elephant, Tina, who is 59, would soon be relocated.

But instead of the sanctuary that Cher and other advocates wanted, officials said the elephants would be moved to a zoo in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where they could join a larger herd. That has led to protests, a lawsuit, tense city meetings, anger at the zoo director and a legal declaration submitted by the pop icon on the elephants’ behalf.

The battle comes at a time when lawsuits from animal-rights advocates and the shrinking number of available animals have led more zoos to close their elephant enclosures. New York City’s Bronx Zoo has faced growing legal pressure to move its last two elephants to a sanctuary, and in 2023, California’s Oakland Zoo sent one of its elephants to a sanctuary in Tennessee after it was unable to find it a compatible companion.

Billy and Tina’s case was in Los Angeles County Superior Court this week, where a judge denied a temporary restraining order in a lawsuit filed by John Kelly, a longtime Los Angeles resident seeking to stop the relocation to Tulsa. The judge’s

action allows zoo officials to move forward unless the City Council decides to intervene.

On Friday, the Nonhuman Rights Project filed a separate lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court to stop the move.

Visited by nearly 1.8 million people a year, the zoo is owned by the city of Los Angeles and has been Billy’s home since he arrived in California as a 4-year-old from Malaysia. Tina joined him in 2010 from San Diego.

Their herd also included Jewel, who was 61 when she died in 2023, and Shaunzi, who died last year at 53. Zoo officials have said that the elephants were declining for reasons unrelated to their enclosure, and that they were euthanized because of age-related health problems.

To keep their accreditation, zoos must maintain a herd larger than two so that the animals can properly socialize with other elephants. Los Angeles officials said there weren’t enough Asian elephants available to acquire more, so they decided to move Billy and Tina to another zoo instead.

Five Asian elephants live on a 17-acre complex at the Tulsa Zoo, and they share a 36,650-square-foot barn – a space much larger than the one Billy and Tina have now. But animal-rights advocates say they are concerned about Billy and Tina being able to adapt, and the trip there being unhealthy or traumatizing.

“Billy and Tina may not be any better off at the Tulsa Zoo than they are at the LA Zoo,” Chris Draper, an expert in animal behavior and management, said in a declaration filed with the lawsuit by animal-rights advocates last week. Draper is on the accreditation committee for the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.

The Los Angeles Zoo, which said in a statement this week that its elephants and other animals “receive the best care possible,” referred questions about the legal battle to the city attorney’s office, which declined to comment.

The zoo’s director, Denise Verret, has said that the decision to move the elephants was made in consultation with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which accredits zoos across the country. She is the current chair of the association’s board of directors.

The decision has prompted criticism from some city officials, and concerns about conflict of interest. At a budget hearing last week, City Council member Bob Blumenfeld asked Verret if she could promise that the elephants would not be moved until council members had a chance to study the move. She did not agree.

“What I can promise you is that I am always going to make decisions that are for the best interest of the animals at the zoo, including the elephants,” Verret said.

For now, it is unclear when the move to Tulsa will happen. Zoo officials said a date had not been determined.

On Friday morning, Tina appeared to be receiving some sort of treatment inside the zoo’s 16,600-square-foot barn. Outside, Billy paced around the 6.56-acre elephant enclosure, at one point stepping in his own feces.

For several minutes, he bobbed his head up and down, which could be interpreted as a sign of a happy elephant. But Cher, co-founder of animal advocacy group Free the Wild, says that when an elephant does that, “they’re having a breakdown.”

Cher acknowledged that she had never visited Billy or his companions at the zoo, but she said in an interview that she had viewed videos of their condition.

“Billy and Tina have served their time in confinement,” she said. “They deserve the chance to live out their lives in peace and dignity.”

# Weather Service had a plan to reinvent itself. Did DOGE stop it?

BY JUDSON JONES  
*NYT News Service/Syndicate Stories*

Ken Graham had a plan.

When he became the director of the National Weather Service during the Biden administration, Graham introduced “Ken’s 10,” a list of priorities he hoped would streamline the department.

In January, addressing a conference hall full of meteorologists in New Orleans, he ticked off some successes, like replacing an antiquated and siloed communications system.

There were challenges, too: Outdated technology and a stagnant budget made it difficult to get employees to stick around. But in a speech that sounded almost like a sales pitch, Graham reminded those in the audience that their work saved lives and, at the cost to every taxpayer of about \$4 a year, offered a great return on investment.

The crowd was skeptical. But Graham assured them the weather office fit into the incoming administration’s agenda. The agency was already lean and had a plan to be more efficient. He just needed time.

Instead, a few weeks later, the Department of Government Efficiency, the initiative led by Elon Musk reshaping the federal bureaucracy, delivered the same order to the Weather Service

that it has across the rest of the government: Make cuts. A lot of them.

Through layoffs and retirements, the Weather Service has lost nearly 600 people from a workforce that until recently was as strong as 4,000.

The reductions cut across two vital functions of the agency: the work of collecting the data used to make forecasts, and the people who turn that data into crucial warnings when extreme weather is on the way.

Weeks ago, as people began leaving the agency, some offices curtailed the regular weather balloon launches that send back data to feed forecast models. In Oakland, California, an office that covers many of the state’s major airports had to rely on colleagues as far away as Los Angeles and Seattle, themselves stretched thin, to cover scheduling gaps.

Now the cuts have led to a staffing crisis so dire that at least eight of the department’s 122 offices will soon no longer have forecasters working overnight, said Tom Fahy, the legislative director for the union that represents Weather Service employees.

“It’s not a chain saw,” said John Sokich, a former director of congressional affairs for the Weather Service. “They’re using a hand grenade.”

Many fear the cuts already

sabotaged one of the most competitive forecasting agencies in the world. But Sokich and others familiar with the Weather Service’s outdated structure wonder if the upheaval – chaotic and fraught as it is – might be the shake-up the Weather Service needs to bring about necessary changes to reorganize for a modern generation of forecasting.

In 1992, the Weather Service Modernization Act created the current framework for the department and gave it one mission: modernize. Back then, the Weather Service was using radar technology developed in the 1950s and a layout of offices it inherited from World War II, and it soon had a network of higher-resolution radars and more than 100 forecasting offices throughout the country. With better data and better ways to analyze that data, forecasts grew more accurate. Warnings came earlier.

Now that infrastructure is showing its age. Graham has warned it could see catastrophic failures by the 2030s, and some of his allies in Congress had been agitating to help replace it.

“Next-generation weather radar is going to be a quantum leap forward from what we have,” said Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Okla., adding that if his colleagues understood how much more advanced the technology could be, implementing it

“probably would have already been done.”

Lucas sponsored the other major piece of legislation that shaped the Weather Service recently. The Weather Research and Forecasting Innovation Act of 2017, signed by President Donald Trump during his first term, allows the department to buy data from commercial providers and to use private companies to help launch its satellites.

Many of the newer weather companies have begun launching their own satellites to acquire data that they can then sell to the Weather Service, and using artificial intelligence in an effort to create better forecasting models. Some experiments have shown AI is becoming better at forecasting some weather events.

Most recently, Project 2025 proposed that the Weather Service “fully commercialize” its forecasting. Its critics, Lucas among them, worry that taking the government out of the forecasting business could lead to public safety becoming subscription-only. “Is it going to be that the people with the most money can afford the best forecast?” he said. “I don’t know that it serves society or the economy.”

With the Atlantic hurricane season bearing down, NWS supporters have been scrambling to blunt the effects of the recent cuts and make the case to the Trump administration that it was going too far. Five of the department’s former directors recently wrote an open letter saying they feared the cuts had been so deep that lives would soon be endangered.