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In Zimbabwe, the Struggle for Land Continues
by Bowden Quinn

SALISBURY, ZIMBABWE -- Competing claims for land by white commercial farmers and black peasant farmers have Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's government spinning.

Until now, Zimbabwe's commercial farmers, almost all of whom are white, have provided strong support for the black government that came to power two years ago. Their productivity has fed a flourishing economy, and they are the sector of the white community most willing to come to terms with the new order in this country, which used to be white-ruled Rhodesia.

However, the farmers feel threatened by a government land-redistribution plan that could take collectively up to half of their land and give it to black peasant farmers, who produce mostly at the subsistence level.

For Mr. Mugabe, the peasants' demands for more land are politically more pressing than the white farmers' worries. The peasants are the main support for Mr. Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, and they are dissatisfied with the slow pace of land redistribution.

The conflict between short-term political considerations and long-range economic needs has forced Mr. Mugabe to resort to the politician's trick of saying different things to different people.

For the past two months, he has played to weekend political rallies with a firebrand radicalism that has raised the hair of a conservative white community already spooked by the government's penchant for Marxist jargon.

At other times, he has gone out of his way to reassure whites that they will have a role in Zimbabwe's future and that the move to socialism will be gradual and voluntary.

The land redistribution program, which is the most important effort to change the racist structure of Rhodesian society, is also the best example of the ambiguities and inherent contradictions of the government's policies.

Land hunger was the main cause of the seven-year guerrilla war that forced whites to hand over power to the blacks.

Rhodesian land policies divided this country into European and African areas, designating almost 45 million acres for each group. Since whites constitute less than 4 percent of the population, the African half of the agricultural land carries about 80 percent of Zimbabwe's rural population.

The 20 percent of the rural population in the European areas are mostly black agricultural workers and their families on white-owned farms.

On the average, black farmers have less than 10 acres of land, while white farmers own an average of more than 1,200 acres per person. In addition, the Rhodesian land division gave most of the better crop-growing land to the whites.

Conditions in many peasant-farming areas are severely over-

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crowded, and the overworked land has become steadily poorer. The government seeks to relieve the overcrowding and allow for the rehabilitation of the exhausted land by resettling thousands of peasant families, as well as ex-guerrillas and refugees from the war, on land formerly reserved for the whites.

For an avowedly socialist government, the resettlement program is remarkably conservative, being almost identical to plans put forward by middle-of-the-road blacks and whites during the late 70s.

The government buys land from whites who are willing to sell, and has so far taken pains to make sure the land will be farmed in a way that will maintain or improve its productivity.

Most of the land has been given on an individual tenure basis, similar to the traditional African land-holding system. Planners say about 95 percent of the land to be redistributed over the next three years will be given on this basis.

Some groups have begun cooperative or communal farms on the redistributed land. The government's long-range plan is for most or all of the African farmers to adopt similar systems, but it says it won't force anyone into such socialistic schemes.

The government also says it will continue to support the white commercial farmers, who account for about 80 percent of agricultural production in Zimbabwe. Because much of their produce is marketed overseas, the white farmers are major earners of foreign exchange. They also employ most of the country's wage labor.

Yet while the government says it expects commercial farm production to grow at an average annual rate of 4 percent, it plans to take away at least 12 million acres, and perhaps as much as 20 million acres, of the white farmland.

The government wants to move 162,000 families, or about 900,000 persons, onto redistributed land in the next three years. Through January, it has moved more than 14,000 families onto about 2 million acres.

The government claims enough farmland is unused or under-used to accommodate all these families without taking away land that the white farmers are putting to good use. The white farmers dispute that claim. The Commercial Farmers Union, the farmers' lobbying organization, estimates only 10 million acres are available.

The farmers contend that the government's plan will displace 1.2 million blacks—agricultural laborers and their families—to resettle 900,000 peasants.

The result will be a drop in agricultural production and a reduction in black earning power, the whites say. The government allots land on the basis of an anticipated annual net income of \$400 per family. Agricultural workers at the minimum wage earn \$600 a year, and wives and children working seasonally part-time raise family incomes to at least \$800 a year, farmers claim.

The government says that since the peasants will settle on unused or under-used land, they will not displace agricultural workers and productivity will increase.

The Commercial Farmers Union also questions the number of peasants the government has decided to resettle. It believes less than half have a legitimate need for more land. Meager results of a registration campaign last year for the resettlement program give credence to this argument.

The government distributed 500,000 registration forms, but only 48,000 families applied for resettlement, and only 31,000 qualified. Government officials say the campaign didn't receive enough publicity and people were confused about the program. They expect a much greater demand for land when a second registration campaign is conducted this year.

The government says the goal of 162,000 resettled families in three years represents the number that land development teams can prepare sites for. The actual number of families that need land may be as high as 300,000, planners estimate.

The Commercial Farmers Union doubts the government can live up to its goal, in light of the slow progress of the program so far. The farmers fear that efforts to meet an unrealistic target will lead to lack of proper preparation of land and people and greater loss of agricultural productivity.

Government officials reply that they now have the experience, trained personnel and equipment to meet their goal.

Another constraint that could slow down the program is lack of funds. Officials say the three-year project will cost about US \$680 million, half to purchase the land and half to develop it. The government complains that foreign countries, particularly Britain, aren't living up to their promises to fund the resettlement program, which were given at the constitutional talks that preceded independence.

In response, Britain, which is the only donor for the land purchases, points out that Zimbabwe has spent only a fraction of the more than \$40 million it has committed to the program on a 50-50 cost-sharing basis with the Zimbabwe government.

For land development, foreign donors have pledged only \$136 million of the \$340 million the government estimates it needs.

Considering that the land issue has been debated for years, it is strange that no one knows how much land is available nor how many people need more land. Sooner or later, though, the black population will crowd around the most productive white farms. At that point, the government will have to reveal what rights it is willing to guarantee for its white citizens.

Farmers have proved to be the most resilient members of the white community to the change in government. Although they bore the brunt of the guerrilla war, they haven't participated in the white flight that reached record proportions last year.

Of 5,150 commercial farmers at independence, about 4,700 remain. This drop is proportionally less than half of the reduction in the white as a whole. Since independence, the number of whites in the country is thought to have dropped from about 220,000 to 180,000.

Farmers feel trapped by currency laws, first enacted by the Rhodesian government, that won't allow them to get their capital out of the country, but they also have an emotional attachment to the land. As a group, the farmers didn't support the Rhodesian Front, the political party whose rigid opposition to power-sharing with blacks led to the guerrilla war.

Many farmers say they will remain until they are forced off the land by the government, or until law and order breaks down completely, which appears unlikely.

So far, the government has given ambiguous signals about what it will do when the push of land-hungry peasants comes to the shove of whites trying to hold onto their farms.

At the beginning of March, Mr. Mugabe and the minister of lands, resettlement and rural development, Moven Mahachi, criticized white farmers for obstructing the resettlement program. Mr. Mahachi said the government will force farmers to sell land it wants for redistribution.

But more recently, Mr. Mahachi said the landless will have to accept inferior agricultural land, since most of the best land is already occupied.

Talks with officials indicate the government probably hasn't made a decision about the long-range implications of the resettlement program. Like the white farmers and the black peasants, the government seems to feel it's wisest not to look too far past the next growing season.

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