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Bread Basket to Begging Bowl **Dry Zimbabwe's 'Slow-Track' Water Derails Mugabe's 'Fast-Track' Land Reform**

By James G. Workman

NOVEMBER 1, 2003

NYAMANDHLOVU, Zimbabwe – This drought-struck country was not the first in Africa to come unglued through an autocrat's ideological agenda. But despite all the politically induced starvation and beating and brainwashing and fraud, despite cigarette-burned hands and condom-covered bayonets inserted into vaginas, it is hard to imagine any nation whose people have remained more painfully decent throughout the upheaval.

"Four months back, when the mob came and killed my neighbor Martin Louws... Oh, dear, you do take cream in your tea, don't you?"

That was Jenny Bickle, 80, still clinging to a remnant of her farm here north of Bulawayo, after recalling how her daughter and son-in-law were nearly beaten to death yet remained on their neighboring farm fragment as well. So proceeded conversations with dozens of Zimbabweans under the thin veneer of normalcy. "As long as there's tea, there's hope," went the saying, so I nodded and answered:

"Yes, please. But no sugar, thanks."

As if the daily perversions and juxtapositions were all quite ordinary. Consider the transport-company manager I met who had been repeatedly harassed because he fired two employees convicted of theft. Or attorney Beatrice Mtetwa, car-hijacked by armed thugs at a busy intersection right in front of police, who proceeded to beat her, book her for public drunkenness and jail her for the night. I began to find it normal to hide in a tool shed with a young ex-clerk named Progress, siphoning black market gasoline from a drum into jerry cans while discussing the state of his marriage.

Yes, yes. All routine. People carried on with the weekly shopping for goods in

Losers or Legend? *Last year Machiavellian Mugabe was asked if he thought the violent land invasions damaged his image. He replied, "If the perception is that of Europeans, well, I suppose you are right to say my reputation has gone down. But in terms of Africa, go anywhere and I am a hero." To Africa's upper classes, he is. But within Zimbabwe his vaunted 'divide and rule' strategy has backfired in irrigation agriculture, where rule over the land is worthless when stored water, and water infrastructure, is divided and gone.*



empty-shelf stores, attending schools with paperless teachers, commuting daily after waiting patiently in two hour bus lines. They packed Internet cafés where war veterans, evicted farmers, students, job seekers and would-be emigrants all sat side-by-side, silently typing “hello. things here are not so easy for us right now but...” to someone, anyone, who might offer help. Men in neatly pressed plaid strolled the Harare golf-course greens, habituated to the black families desperately sawing up 300-year-old indigenous trees for cooking fuel because the nation’s kerosene had run out. A more subtle but lasting image was my landlady cheerfully humming a Sting song as she ironed out a stack of increasingly worthless currency, with some notes set to expire July 2004.

It was an odd madness that had crept in so slowly, that everyone had grown gradually...ownership of barren, unproductive land, making used to it, with a sigh and a shrug and a half smile. In the background filtered the government propaganda glorifying the ownership of unproductive land, making poverty noble, and issuing statements like: “Democracy equals imperialism.” Or arresting Sue Burr, who calmly assembled with 200 passive resisters in a demonstration, giving her a permanent criminal record under the charge: “Actions that could promote the peace.” Every morning I awoke half expecting to be transformed into a giant insect, or to hear all the clocks strike thirteen, or to hear the radio announce Ground Hog Day.

Except that in contrast to those gloomy Kafka and Orwell dystopias, everyone here tried to appear so damned upbeat through it all. Stiff upper lip. No complaining or tears allowed; in fact, they were all apologies for any inconvenience.

The black marketers in Harare and Bulawayo apologized for the 20-minute delay in their ability to scrounge up fuel, or for having only small-denomination currency bills that I had to bundle and carry in a pillowcase. A bleary-eyed Iain Jarvis apologized for not greeting me more cheerfully the morning after his 15-year-old safari camp had been overrun by an armed mob. Sculptors apologized for not having any plastic bags to carry their art. Richard Pascal apologized “for not having cream with our garden’s last strawberries; it’s just that the drought and stolen fodder has made it difficult to produce.” Each police-stop at road blocks — up to five a day — felt less annoying for the hassle than for their insufferably polite greeting and apologetic well-wishing us a ‘safe journey.’ One night the dreaded paramilitary Green Bombers showed up at the Harare Sports Club to ‘take care of’ conservation activist Johnny Rodrigues, who teased them in their own language about how ridiculous it

was that they were working for bosses who didn’t pay them; they left sheepishly apologizing for the intrusion. He invited them back anytime.

And the menacing mobs who since early 2000 appeared on thousands of white-owned farms? Dangerous, yes. And deadly. But for the most part they advanced only gradually over many months, chaotically, sheepishly, haltingly, full of ‘excuse-me-but’s,’ laughing under the influence of marijuana and alcohol and music after an all-night *pungwe*,¹ and uncertain whether Big Brother would back them up in the end (He did not). One leader would announce himself a farm’s new ‘caretaker,’ with a bit of a laugh, and his thugs might blast their radios at full volume through the night, hoping they could simply ‘dance’ the legally-legitimate-but-white title-deed holders off their property.

Eventually, of course, they did. That’s when the stoic cheerfulness faltered on both sides. Almost all the farmers broke under the unrelenting onslaught of encroachment, Section 5 (‘initial notice to acquire the farm’), Section 8 (Confirmation that farmers have 7 or 90 days to leave) their A1 (small-scale, designated for war veterans) or A2 farms (for large-scale new owners). But these were mere formalities. When I could conjugate all this hastily legislated legal verbiage, I asked Iain and Kerry Kay, “when you finally left your farm in Mashonaland West, was it after they presented you with a Section 5 or Section 8?”

“No, it was after they presented us with an AK-47,” Iain replied curtly, braving a smile. “It’s a rather persuasive document.”

* * *

It was indeed. A decade ago a third of Zimbabwe was still owned by the ‘European’ tribe; as beneficiaries of a century-old legacy of racist, lopsided colonial



Tobacco Transplant:
In three years export of the once-profitable ‘evil weed’ has plunged from 232,000 kilograms to 50,000. This farmland south of Harare was the only farm activity I saw traversing the country in the peak of the busiest season. Transplanting a crop is labor-intensive; transplanting water had become nearly impossible.

¹ In recent years this word has evolved darker connotations than a gathering festivity, to mean ritual hyped paramilitary indoctrination into violent cults, turning the hungry young against their parents or employers through criminal acts of ‘necessary violence.’

laws, whites held the richest, most desirable arable land in the country. Though proud of their ability to feed the continent, they also knew their heritage was as inequitable as it was unjust. Not a farmer I spoke with, white or black, opposed redistribution of the country's farmland. The slippery part was *how*.

One long-standing approach, backed by international donors and agreed to by Commonwealth and African heads of state, proposed carefully transferring productive land on a lawful, transparent and economically sustainable basis, resulting in poverty alleviation.

Fair, yes; fast, no. Armed and restless war veterans grew impatient for their reward for liberating the nation two decades earlier. During a public confrontation in August 1997 these 'warvets' forced a vow from their once-confident, now visibly shaken President Robert Gabriel Mugabe that he must deliver on his promises. He quickly paid these soldiers — and other loyalists who had nothing to do with the war — with money the government did not have. Two years later a majority of Zimbabweans rejected Mugabe's constitutional referendum, having had enough of the increasingly corrupt and detached leader, and proposed an alternative party and candidate. Mugabe viewed this embarrassment as (not entirely without basis) having the organizational backing of the tiny white minority. Immediately following this challenge, under the guise of "Fast Track Land Redistribution" his government sponsored groups of 'warvets' (many under 30 who could not possibly have been older than seven at the time of cease-fire) to use whatever means possible to drive white farmers off their land.²

Starting in March 2000, white land-ownership shrank from a third to less than 2 percent of the country, and from 4,500 whites operating commercial farms to fewer than 400 today. In blindly ideological-racial terms, these abstract figures accurately reflect 'proportionate representation,' and Mugabe could retire having at last fulfilled his end-of-white-rule promise to his people. Except that truncating those politically 'white' families had economically 'nonwhite' repercussions.

Deeply rooted whites employed, schooled and medically treated 300,000 blacks who supported 2.5 million family members who required, say, 2 million school uniforms and 5 million shoes and tools and paint and transport and food and medicine. It turned out that 80 percent of the country's 11.3 million people derived their livelihood either directly or indirectly from colorblind agriculture, which also generated foreign currency to



Ready to return, but only on their terms: *Some officials have quietly asked Carol and Richard Pascal to return to their game and agricultural farm, where he had been planning a \$600,000 dam and gravity-fed drip irrigation system, hiring 80-100 local families...until 'warvets' swarmed his farm. "They've tried to desalinate farmers, the Biblical 'salt of the earth,'" said Pascal, with a smile. "But water is too valuable here."*

purchase what the country couldn't make itself.

Small wonder that since 'Fast Track' began, inflation rose 400 percent, 3 million people began starving, and in cities dozens of unemployed regularly swarmed our vehicle in broad daylight, even when parked with people sitting inside, hoping to find an unlocked door or open window. The currency had tanked to 2 percent of its former value. Between 70 and 80 percent of Zimbabweans sank below poverty. Half the wildlife has been eaten. Most troubling, 3 million of the brightest, most educated and skilled Zimbabweans have fled the country, not to mention an internal 'brain drain' where engineers and nurses — and bank clerks like my new 'business associate in the fuel trade,' Progress — take up black-market trade to pay the rent and to buy food.

Most observers, inside or outside the country, estimate that of this multi-colored brain drain, few educated bourgeois black Zimbabweans — teachers, doctors, lawyers, clerks, analysts, mechanics, shopkeepers — are likely to return. After a few comfortable years of assimilating into a life where their skills are respected and compensated by another society, there's little incentive to go back.

But ironically, and for converse reasons, white commercial farmers who made a successful marriage of irri-

² I came across a chilling leaked memo dated 25th July 2000, attributed to the War Vets Assn., entitled, 'On The White Farmers & Opposition.' Though hard to authenticate, it urged much of what took place over the subsequent three years, including: 'Operation "Give-up-and-leave" ...so that farmers are systematically harassed and mentally tortured and their farms destabilized until they 'give in' and 'give up.'

The memo's next bullet advised that for 'some farmers, "The Palmire-Silencing-Method" should be used. It should never be pointed to anyone other than the victim him/herself.' Palmire was an outspoken dissident of Zanu-PF, who died in a car 'accident' in which the brake cables had been severed.

Drip By Drip Future:
"The old-timers around here, they tell us they want us to stay now," said Nic Stipnovich, as we walked along his newly planted rows of tomatoes, watered by Israeli-manufactured drip irrigation technology.. He recently learned that officials secretly have 'designated' his irrigation farm and handed it over to a new owner: himself. "They say if we leave, then Mugabe has won, and the country is lost."



gation and agriculture — and whose skills can't pay the mortgage in other rainy industrial countries — may have every reason to return. Assuming, that is, they ever left the country in the first place.

In fact, four out of five white commercial farmers remain in Zimbabwe. They wait out the storm in rented urban flats, constantly testing the shifting political climate by cell phone and e-mail, printing underground tabloids after the government has censored and shuttered the only free press.

I'm a crude barometer, but as the first light rains sprinkled un-plowed and unsown barren fields, their political outlook appeared increasingly sunny. With urban and rural starvation on the rise, and a cash-starved government spending more money printing currency than that currency was worth, white irrigation farmers arguably had become quietly recognized as Zimbabwe's most precious commodity, and potential salvation.

Why? How? Only last year white commercial farmers were, according to the government, the former "colonial oppressors" who "shackled" Zimbabwe to its past. They were the targets of loud, riot-inciting political abuse by Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union — Popular Front). What transformed them into the object of reluctant praise, sometimes by the same politicians?

Hunger, for starters. Some of the uneducated here may actually believe the government's 'blame-colonialism-for-everything' propaganda. They may duly recount the conspiracy of the day, that, for example, "the current, two-year, devastating drought was deliberately designed and caused by European imperialists as punishment for our reclaiming the country." Yet they also recall clearly how white farmers always managed to grow crops and money despite equally severe droughts in the past. White farmers were regarded as more and more valuable by the day, simply because they alone knew how to produce

food and earn taxable incomes selling tobacco, paprika, timber, roses and game for export.

Okay, so white commercial farmers knew how to plant, cultivate and harvest. But so did millions of black communal subsistence farmers who now could not afford enough maize seeds to plant a single row. The life-and-death distinction was this: whites had the money and means and training and organization to prepare for and endure Africa's dry seasons and arid regions. They knew how to build dams and canals. They could install and rehabilitate boreholes and pumps and pipes and drip-irrigation. They knew irrigation's economies of scale. Right now, that was unique.

In short, anyone could farm Zimbabwe's land. Only a few knew how to farm its *water*.

"Communal farmers in wet years grow enough food to feed the country," said Iain Kay, a third-generation white commercial farmer and opposition activist. "But any country can survive a good year, living day to day. It's the bad dry years where you need a strategic reserve, in terms of cash or grain. That's where irrigation makes the difference. It adds value to land, to plan ahead. It allows for two crops, winter wheat and staple food.

"The pivotal thing is law and order," he continued, "and irrigation is an expression of exactly that. Look at the terraced paddies in Asia. Look at the aqueducts of Rome. Water development always ran parallel to enduring civilizations. Their survival depended on the ordered storage and sorting of water, creating certainty between flood and drought, and liberating people from proximity to rivers. That was the vision we were working toward when we designed, borrowed on a 20-year loan, and constructed a dam and 20-kilometer irrigation canal over the course of two years."

Four years ago farm families tried to impress such critical plan-ahead irrigation lessons on political leaders. Back in late 1999 over two weeks, the farmers invited local officials and provincial-government administrators out to show what they had been doing, and why. All appeared impressed by the demonstration, and the Governor, David Karamazira, expressed gratitude, congratulations and encouragement to do more.

Months later, Mugabe's 'Fast Track Land Reform' began. And that same Governor who praised the dam became responsible for tearing it apart for personal and political gain. The breakdown of irrigation became an expression of, and ran parallel to, the breakdown of law and order.

I asked, "Do you regret building all that water infra-

structure only to watch it come apart through state-sanctioned vandalism?"

"No."

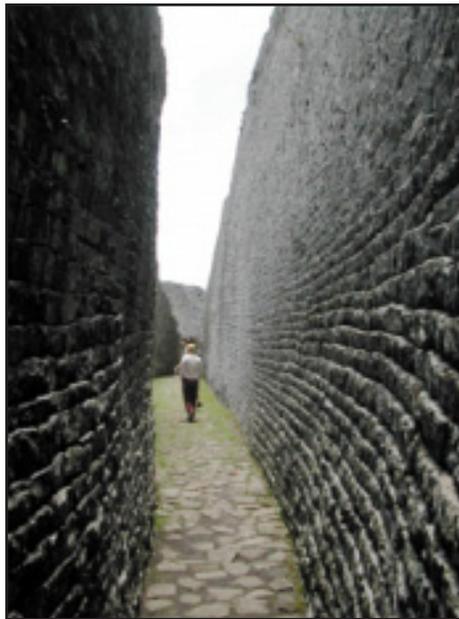
"Why not?"

"Because it defined who we were and what we stood for. Building dams as we did will win the day. We were not pillaging the land like miners. We were in for the endgame, or at least the next generation. Unlike a tree that has a finite lifespan, you build a dam and that's it. Forever. We're an arid country with erratic rainfall. But when this nonsense began, the dams were full. They would still be full, except they've pulled the plug."

* * *

How and why 'they' pulled the plug on myriad water projects, large or small, became an enduring subject of fascination for me. In stable countries like the US, France or Australia, I thrilled to the act of carefully removing abandoned, harmful, obsolete dams through consensus, in order to heal a river.

In Zimbabwe I began to recognize that 'obsolete' lay in the eye of the beholder. 'Consensus' was a fickle force granted to whomever wields the weapons. And here removal was deliberate, but far from careful. As a result rivers did not heal; they bled: Last-ditch subsistence farms appeared on receding river edges until the bank collapsed. Millions of drifters ravaged and burnt plantations, eroding topsoil in sheets. Soon a thick, heavy sediment load clogged rivers. Made shallow by rising silt deposits, rivers from the Save to the Sengwa grew warm, murky, algae-filled and dead. As a final insult and injury, desperate wildcatters began panning (yes, just as in California's 1849 Gold Rush) on newly forsaken farm streams, using illegal toxins to extract gold flecks.



History Repeats Itself?

The magnificent ruins of Great Zimbabwe – Houses of Stone – Africa's first iron-age medieval civilization. Eight centuries ago, the namesake of the modern state imploded after its ruling elite miscalculated use of arid land, burning up hardwood forests to smelt ore faster than they could grow; today it may collapse in a modern drought, lacking dams, pipes and thus irrigation water to grow food.

As rivers sickened, so did people. A week before I arrived there, the Bulawayo City Council announced that, due to budget shortfalls, it had stopped testing the city's drinking water for cyanide and mercury, the chemicals widely used by gold panners and mining concerns based along the major rivers that feed the city's five supply dams.

* * *

Consider the life-and-death fate of man and dam on a single farm. When Iain Kay and his neighbors designed, built and finally finished that carefully engineered canal, pipes and irrigation dam, he hoped it would earn the farms more money and lead to more employment. He dreamed it would last for generations, outliving his grandchildren. He had no idea the dam would save his life, and he would outlive it.

Shortly after completion, Iain was checking progress with the builder of the school on his farm. "I saw a swarm of two dozen ZANU PF youth coming at me, armed with crude weapons and they caught me there alone," he recalled, matter-of-factly one evening over drinks. "I tried to seek refuge, but after an hour they broke a door down and dragged me out. They'd burnt my motorbike and taken my radio. They tied my hands in wire and prepared to, as they said, 'finish me off.' Only two people saw them come (besides school kids and teachers who were too afraid to intervene). One ran off and told my son, David, who arrived an hour later, and when the mob heard the engine, they got skittish. While they looked around I ran 200 meters away and dashed to the dam. I knew they couldn't swim, and so got away by plunging in. They threw rocks, but luckily didn't hit me, and eventually ran away."

He survived; his dam did not. At the time



of his rescue it was a deep, plastic lined reservoir, a water bank against dry times. Today, like thousands of farm dams around the country, that dam was, at last report, empty. But not because of the drought.

Squatters and ‘resettlers,’ the politically connected new ‘farmers’ incapable of irrigation, all had simply broken or drilled holes in the walls, drained the dams. Why? To get at the fish — barbell, tilapia, catfish, bream — and eat them. This was, I came to understand, perfectly normal behavior. Families were hungry. They had to eat. They didn’t know if they would be there tomorrow, or would be moved off themselves by those in power. If they didn’t drain the dams for fish, someone else later on most certainly would. To the majority of the rural poor, trying to survive in the middle of a drought, dams were worth more empty than full.³

* * *

Unplugged dams were just one revealing and symbolic aspect, sometimes the final stage, of irrigation’s (parallel with law-and-order’s) unraveling in Zimbabwe. The process began when white commercial farmers were too distracted, or physically incapacitated, to carry out the regular maintenance that every African irrigation farm demands.

Into this vacuum, first came the termites. Turns out the oldest moving occupants of Africa’s hot dry landscape also like climate control, or humidified air conditioning. So they built their homes adjacent to water. That happened to be near or under dam walls constructed and



Underground Press: *These tabloids had to be smuggled around bus stops, where readers starved for non-censored, non-government news devoured news of municipal election returns in other cities.*

maintained by man. Should man retreat, termite-mounds grow, undermine the dam wall, concrete barriers and canals.

Then came trees, whose thirsty roots compete for moisture and will seek out and tunnel into canals, underground pipes or reservoirs. Asbestos pipe dried and cracked. Loose sediment sneaked into pipes where it accumulated, restricted flow and then permanently hardened like cement. Dried out rubber joints didn’t seal properly; roots wedged in where leaks sprang out until they caused a permanent breach.

This incremental unraveling accelerated once commercial farmers surrendered and were forcibly evicted from their homes, retreating after futile last attempts to preserve irrigation in some form. What followed could be called a “dried-earth policy.” Along with worldly belongings, farmers sought to remove all their plumbing from the farm, their water investments that made a farm produce through erratic seasons. In the backs of borrowed or rented trucks some white commercial farmers loaded pipes and generators and pumps, or whatever was left of them at that point. Few managed to get past the farm perimeters, whose gates were guarded by armed war veterans. They were told that they must leave the water infrastructure behind.

“It is part of the farm that is now ours,” said the squatters.

“No, these are improvements to the farm we added ourselves,” they replied. “You take this goddamn farm, you take it in the condition we found it.”

Disputes on-site or later in court were more often resolved by a show of weapons than any legal order. But whether the water infrastructure stayed behind, buried



Secret Weapon: *This pump was concealed, and still functions. Not so elsewhere in the country. What Mugabe may have underestimated was how during drought: For want of a farmer maintaining the pump-switch washers, the pipe was lost; for want of a pipe the water was lost; for want of the water the farm was lost; for want of the farm the food was lost; for want of food, Zimbabweans may finally sour on their leader.*

³ Others drained other dams to use the pressured outflow water for makeshift gold panning, hoping for a few flecks of shiny ore to buy food, since no one could grow anything.

neatly in the ground or left in a disorderly heap, the outcome was the same. It was dismantled like insects take apart a fallen branch. Newcomers removed copper wire from electric generators, and sold it. They took brass out of taps, and sold it. They took copper or plastic PVC joints, and sold them. Tomato-training string, wires, pipes? Sold. Hoses sold in the country appeared in cities where they were used to siphon fuel.

Like Ian Kay, Wynand Hart once had 90 hectares under irrigation. After he was forced off, he said the farm's new 'caretakers' broke his Star Delta switchbox (which started the motor on pumps), sold the switches, stole the pumps and motors, the transformers, the movable irrigation pipes, the easily mobile joints of underground pipes. There is always a demand, at the right price, for such parts, either in cities as scrap metal, or to new farmers. But that's beside the point.

"Say I spent Z\$100,000 for aluminum pipes," said Hart. "If he can get Z\$1,000 from his find, that's money for nothing. But the long term, renewable and cumulative value lost is incalculable. A cake is not the individual parts of flour, butter, eggs and sugar in isolation; it is the carefully measured and combined sum of the whole over time. Likewise, a farm is not worth the land, seed, or fertilizer alone, or the individual pieces of pipe. It is the yearly product combined and all those people who benefit down the road. Those pipes and switches and pumps could have generated tens of millions a year."

As once they did. Two years ago Jeff Miclim's farm outside Mvurwi was the world's biggest tobacco producer; it used to irrigate 600 hectares from a 20,000-megaliter dam. Today the dam's gate valve is permanently open after the brass tap was vandalized. All electrical motors and switchgears on the dam and river have been broken open to remove copper wire. Center pivots were vandalized and aluminum piping smashed for scrap metal. Nothing is being irrigated today.

No one was rude about all this. Nothing seemed malicious, driven by bitter vengeance. It was simply a matter of survival. People became opportunists without

Freedom is Nothing Left

to Lose: *The day before I interviewed anti-communist soldier turned eco-activist Johnny Rodrigues, officials tried to deport him from the country for naming names of elites profiting from liquidation of wildlife. "They've stolen everything I own but I won't leave. I'm a Zimbabwean. The only thing I value they could still take is my family."*



choice. Said Kay, "Any long-term thoughts of how to make use of water resources were not worth considering. When that scavenger mentality takes hold, everything is fair game."

* * *

Including game. In the drier, wilder southwestern half of the country vandalized water infrastructure led to, and fueled, a hunter-gatherer syndrome.

Boreholes and pumps that had been installed by USAID to secure water points for people, livestock and game were dismantled overnight. Livestock had already died or been eaten. So people (those not debilitated by AIDS or starvation, that is) began to take apart the pumps, remove narrow rods, sharpen the ends into *assegais* (spears) used to hunt and kill indigenous wildlife that endured the drought.

Since today the boreholes no longer function, sighed Johnny Rodrigues, "Those [animals] who escaped the new poachers are now in danger of dying of thirst."

Other desperate, hungry Zimbabweans unwound wires from fences and tomato and grape farms and looped them into snares; 20 miles north of Bulawayo, Jenny Bickle cleared 50 such snares from one football-field-sized plot of her farm. Game that once drew photographic tourists and trophy hunters reverted to becoming simply meat. And the pumpless, vandalized boreholes became useless for humans, who drifted to the cities.

There the dismantling continued. Stolen wires and pumps could be resold only to those with hard currency outside Zimbabwe's borders. This led to blackouts. I finally found a filling station where the smiling attendant — again, ever so politely and apologetically — announced, "Yes, we have plenty of petrol, but no electricity or pump to get it."

* * *

Physics tells us that every action — even the dismantling of urban, game-reserve and agricultural-water infrastructure — eventually produces an equal and opposite reaction. I could not stay in the country long enough to confirm this, but as farm dams and irrigation came unglued by the politically-encouraged chaos, it seemed a simple but subtle and logical shift was taking place. Zanu-PF leaders at every level wanted, naturally enough, to stay in power. To keep control they required food and money.

Officials first tried to get money the old-fashioned way. They arbitrarily imposed new, or dramatically raised existing, water levies, fees and tariffs. But extortion is only effective if there is someone, or something, to extort. Who might that be?

Not long ago Carol and Richard Pascal received a bill of Z\$360,000 for the water they used on their game farm, Gourlays. This was unusual for several reasons.

First, because they had for decades pumped and reticulated all their own water from their own borehole on their own property. The state was never involved. Second because the amount they were billed for was pure conjecture, based entirely on dated estimates of 'water capacity.' Under new legislation in 2001, it seemed, water now became a 'communally owned resource' like mineral rights, owned by the State. Very well. At any other time in the nation's history, this might make sense. Water bailiffs had always been strict in measuring and regulating flows; and by charging for water the nation might reduce waste and increase efficiency.

But now the state was charging them, retroactively, for a year's worth of theoretical water, that had leaked away after vandalism, on a farm from which they had been evicted two years ago. This was going a bit too far. "They wanted us to pay their water bills after they stole our land and water," said Carol. "No way." The officials apologized politely, then sent the bill anyway.

If you can't extort large sums from the relatively wealthy few, perhaps you can extort small sums from the impoverished multitudes. Hundreds of thousands of obscenely hiked-up water bills were mailed to Zimbabwe's individuals, regardless of colour or class. The Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) last month increased water tariffs by between 80 percent and 100 percent, to ZWD 180 (officially 20 cents) per cubic meter for those who consume up to 10 cubic meters of water per month, while those who consume up to 25 cubic meters now pay ZWD 280 (30 cents) per cubic meter. At least that's the official line.

In reality, and 'for reasons unknown,' dozens of ramshackle nonwhite communities outlying Harare have been designated as 'commercial/industrial zones for purposes of billing.' That jargon meant the residents must pay ten times more for their water. Wellington Pamuli and Cecil Makoni's water bills increased from Z\$3,000 last month to Z\$23,000 and Z\$45,000 this month, respectively. Nine out of ten residents are unemployed. Makoni survives through begging; Pumuli makes Z\$30,000 (US\$5) a month selling crude sculptures. They were shocked, but stunned as to what to do.

In a bad gangster movie, that would be when Guido shows up with "a generous offer from da boss." In Zimbabwe, that's when water bills became political leverage to win votes. In Kadoma, 70 miles southwest of Harare, an elderly grandmother of six reported that ZANU PF

officials were offering to "pay" water bills of residents whose payments were in arrears. They had approached her, but she declined, later remarking, "I know these bills will only be paid up to the elections."

But like the irrigation takeovers, the extortionate water-rate hikes appeared to have backfired. Water scarcity split political leadership at all levels.

At the cabinet level, Zimbabwe's Directorate of Disease Prevention and Control warned that ZINWA's "plans to disconnect water services to all towns owing it money could trigger widespread outbreaks of disease, which the health ministry may not have the capacity to control."



A Sticky Wicket: Foreign relations vis-à-vis Zimbabwe involve hard ethical decisions: whether to engage and expose through interaction, or shame and shun through isolation. Athletes boycotted World Cup Cricket in Zimbabwe as a protest. More difficult is whether shipping grain as food aid will help millions of starving or merely prop up, prolong and legitimize Mugabe's government.

Cities were divided as well. The taxpayer-funded, urbane executive mayor of Harare, Misheck Shoko, advised residents to pay their bills rather than risk potential water cut-offs. But a local member of parliament, Job Sikhala, strongly urged his constituents not to pay. In a rousing speech, he urged: "Anyone who sees a city-council employee out to disconnect water should raise alarm!"

* * *

These miscalculations were only one sign that the government's well was running dry; Zanu-PF was hitting rock bottom. Even as it failed to milk more how-can-I-stay-comfortably-in-official-position money through ridiculous urban and rural water fees, Zanu-PF began taking a second look at the commercial irrigation farms they had

so successfully helped vandalize. To generate food and money they needed those commercial farms to produce again. To produce, commercial farms required irrigation. But who could they get to irrigate?

Who besides white *muzungus*, that is. Hmmm. How about Asian *muzungus*? Earlier this year the government announced it would import Chinese to bulldoze 100,000 hectares of virgin Mopane bush near Masvingo into commercial farmland, then irrigate and grow 2 million tons of crops. According to state propaganda, the China International Water and Electric Corp. would clear the land, establish irrigation infrastructure and plant maize and sorghum to "restore Zimbabwe as the bread basket of Africa,...position it as a leader in irrigation and agriculture...and create thousands of jobs."

No doubt. But the Malaysian seeds they planted never took root in the dry ground. Said Rodrigues: "Somehow the black leadership felt that, since its history with white colonials was so sour, the Chinese and North Koreans⁴

⁴ In the 1970s ZANU's military forces went to China for Maoist training.

might be better.” Following that March announcement Zimbabwe’s inflation rose 21 percent a month; a loaf of bread went from Z\$300 then to Z\$1,400 today.

The state newspaper then enthusiastically reported that Mugabe intended to establish an irrigation scheme of at least 500 hectares in each of the country’s 59 districts to cope with future droughts. In response, agricultural economists pointed out that developing the irrigation schemes would be ‘difficult,’ if not impossible, as there was ‘no title to land to be used as collateral for banks, and the government was broke.’

Meanwhile, subsistence and resettled farmers had no seeds to plant. White commercial farmers sat waiting in their rented urban apartments, grinding their teeth, biding their time. They knew Zimbabwe could have withstood the crippling drought thanks to its huge irrigation infrastructure. But any irrigation equipment that was left behind had been stolen or destroyed. So had been more priceless trust and confidence.

“I would never go back to farming without irrigation, as it’s too unpredictable otherwise” said Derek Jaansen⁵ who had a farm on a tributary to the Mazowe River, 50 kilometers outside Harare. Jaansen, like others, had been in the early stages of constructing a dam and irrigation infrastructure. Then the first ‘warvet’ squatters showed up to politely ‘discuss’ their demands. The government “lost the plot” and he and his family — under this term Jaansen included workers’ families who depended on him for schooling, medicine and homes — were subsequently “turfed off our farm.”

To a family, these once-productive commercial farmers I spoke with — Kay, Micklim, Jaansen, Hart, Rodrigues, Pascal and Bickle — unanimously admit that they were caught off guard by Mugabe’s agenda. They thought they could play the game even after the government kept ‘shifting the goal posts.’ As agreements broke, trust faltered: first in the government, then in their own operations.

Most remained polite about it but after a few glasses of wine or tea, some farmers relaxed enough to refer to the government and its hired squatters/resettlers as ‘these monkeys’ or ‘fucking kaffirs’ or ‘black bastards’ or simply ‘niggers.’ As their guest, I did not protest such outbursts, since it was I who had provoked them by dredging up painful details of memories of violent dispossession by angry nonwhite mobs. But in my silence after such epithets, they often smiled ruefully. “You know when I talk like this I must sound racist,” said one. “But three years ago it was a different story. Race was not an issue anywhere in the country. We were never like South Africa, or even America. It only became so in the last three years, with all this non-



No One Wants to Be A Millionaire: *The devaluation of currency made billionaires out of many, but no one could eat or drink a Z\$5,000-note that was not worth forging, that took a week to earn, and that could barely buy two loaves of bread.*

sense. And that’s the sad part. All thanks to one man.”

One man.

“In hindsight we totally underestimated Mugabe and his intentions right from the start,” said Hart, echoing the grudging respect whites felt for what they called the ‘malignant genius’ of Mugabe’s divide-and-rule strategy. Mugabe deftly played his hostile domestic adversaries off against each other, and framed the crisis as a free nation set against former colonial powers. A climax came in August 2002 at the Johannesburg Earth Summit, when he proclaimed, to standing pan-African ovation: “*We will not go back!*”

But commercial farmers and farm workers have begun to take comfort in one thing. It now seems that despite his brilliant, calculating Machiavellian tactics, Mugabe may himself have totally underestimated the force of irrigation right from the start. He thought land could make or break his economy, his country and his own personal survival. But he seemed to have forgotten that ‘our productive farmland’ was utterly dependent on irrigated water.

* * *

Hence the vague, tentative but increasingly desperate feelers in recent weeks that, Mugabean rhetoric aside, perhaps the truth was closer to a whispered ‘Under the circumstances, *We may go back.*’ Recently, the Zimbabwean government announced plans to lure back commercial farmers by offering the return of some of their properties in exchange for irrigation equipment for use by newly resettled farmers.

This announcement was enough to induce me to

⁵ Not his real name. He was comfortable using his real name, but his wife was not until they were safely out of the country. Every other individual in this dispatch is genuine, a testament to the stoic courage of people, white and black, whose lives and families were in danger, especially talking to a “tourist” reporting to the outside world.

overlook laws that promised to arrest, jail, fine or deport foreign correspondents and seek out material for this dispatch. And over the following weeks I found that unlike much government propaganda, this “government plans to lure back commercial farmers” report was true.

Indeed, while I was playing ‘tourist’ across the country, phoning and visiting ‘friends,’ I learned that various suitors were wooing many farm refugees back to their land. These suitors included black farming neighbors, communal farmers needing seed, outspoken members of parliament, officials within the government, the well-connected black ‘farmers’ who unlawfully took over their land, or even their former employees and squatters and ‘warvets’ who had turned on them to curry favor with the government and had in turn been betrayed by their sponsors when, inevitably, the money ran out.

Mugabe shut down public political demonstrations and independent press. But he could not, and did not, block access to the Internet or cell phones (which his own lieutenants relied on), where more dangerous, if less flagrant, counterinsurgency was most likely organizing against the state.

Would they take up the offer? Were they going to return to full-scale farming, to cooperate with those who forced them off their ancestral homes, and help them share irrigation on crops?

“No, not just yet, not on Mugabe’s terms,” said Wynand Hart, shaking his head. “We’ve learned our lesson the hard way, and are waiting until this thing bottoms out.” Hart was now director of Justice for Agriculture (JAG), a farmer- and farm worker-support group formed in early 2002 to challenge illegal and unconstitutional practices in the agricultural sector. JAG’s farmer-activist leaders were brashly outspoken because, as Jaansen said “we’ve got nothing left to lose, except our lives.” Appeasement had proven futile. Cooperation had failed. Trust was gone. The rights-based law, founded almost entirely on title deeds to their farms, had been kept secure in safes out of the government’s reach until the right time.

My question for everyone concerned when, exactly, would ‘this thing bottom out’? Hart shook his head, “It’s not a matter of when — we’ve fallen for that before. Rather than a timeline it’s a question of what conditions must first be met. First, the government must agree that rights have been taken away, fixing justice and accountability. Second, they must restore investor confidence through law and order. Finally, we will need goodwill money carried out transparently, not just for compensation, but poverty alleviation.”

* * *

Tall order. And false hopes were not just dangerous, but cruel. Still, I watched distribution of underground news screeds that were eagerly absorbed, read and hidden beneath rocks at bus stations. I saw auto mechanics’ eyes light up at the latest rumor of Mugabe’s deteriorating health. I learned that the opposition Movement for

Democratic Change (MDC) was winning municipal elections and gathering momentum even in rural towns. I read cases where Zanu-PF appointed judges more frequently showing backbone in rulings against their government. Pressure was building outside the country as well; while blindly loyal leaders in neighboring commonwealth countries like Namibia and South Africa still did not condemn Mugabe, at least they no longer praised him with last year’s enthusiasm. Announcing its own land-redistribution program, South Africa’s Deputy President Jacob Zuma pointedly contrasted how “his country’s transparent, consensus-based policy was so unlike that of others.” For ‘others,’ read: Zimbabwe.

North of Bulawayo, Nic and Zoe Stipinovich and Jenny Bickle have read surprising confidential documents that showed them listed by the government as the ‘new owners’ of the farms they never left in the first place. They

have begun to plant tomatoes with drip irrigation from a farm dam. That dam survived mainly because squatters built their sheds around cattle-watering troughs under the mistaken belief that that corner of the property was where the water came from (and not through underground pipes). A year later they realized their mistake, and some have moved off, unable to make the land work even at a subsistence level.

What happens when the government’s resettled ‘farmers’ leave the dry land?

“Well,” said Jenny Bickle, over tea. “We just quietly try to take it back and reassemble the farm, piece by piece.”

* * *

What will happen next? Even black-market currency exchangers, who had an incentive for instability, felt that a change for the better was underway. “It has already begun,” said a dredlocked Mr. Mesh, in the dark gloomy backroom of a hotel outside Masvingo.

Perhaps the most poignant ‘crystal ball’ anecdote comes from the Kays. In the 1990s, some of their farm workers died of AIDS-related illness, leaving three young male orphans on the farm. The Kays told me they made a point of looking after them, employing them and ensuring they had adequate medical and educational attention. But with the rise of “Fast-Track,” the boys gravitated toward the all-night *pungwes* organized by the war veterans.

They accepted free beer and marijuana from the charismatic Green Bombers, and devoured talk about how the land would be given back to the people. They were taught to fight and beat and kill. They got caught up in the excitement and solidarity. And so when Iain Kay was

Roll Over Cecil Rhodes

The Muddy Water-and-Land Legacy Left Behind

This was an admittedly lopsided report. For various reasons — legal, political and personal safety — I failed my responsibility to interview ‘the other side,’ namely the new black owners, war veterans or otherwise, who took over white farms.

But to view the land issue through their eyes revealed parallel sources of outrage from cycles of history that began, infamously, with terrorists on September 11.

September 11, 1890, that is, when the first white intruders arrived in the heart of what would be Rhodesia. The Pioneer Column of the British South Africa Company, led by Major Frank Johnson, ‘discovered’ rich, well-watered marshland at the center of a large plateau, decided it would make a superb farmland, and expropriated it, Mugabe-style, from the local Shona inhabitants. Raising the Union Jack, he suggested it would make a fine capital of the new country the BSAC was founding, named it Ft. Salisbury, later Salisbury, later to become modern Harare.

The following winter, white ‘resettlers’ broke over the land like a flood. Four years later a British Land Commission declared itself unable to remove white settlers from ‘native’ land. In the following decades the British recommended division of land among races. It established 21.5 million acres of mostly marginal land as ‘Native Reserves,’ and 48 million prime acres for occupation and purchase only by Europeans.

After World War II the government began to invest heavily in water infrastructure. It established water bailiffs who allocated water rights and kept track of and regulated the amount of water farmers used for irrigation.

In the 1950s it began to finance dam construction on a large scale, second on the continent only to South Africa. A case in point was the Umguze River Irrigation Scheme north of Bulawayo. It was designed to reward “War Veterans” from a different era, a different liberation struggle: the colonial men who served in the British armed forces. In arid landscapes, the schemes would theoretically allow these white ‘warvets’ 50-acre plots of dairy-farming crops, along with 200 acres of dryland plots or pasture. Reluctant at first, the white commercial farmers made these exclu-



Can't Rest In Peace: *The grave of Cecil John Rhodes is set amid immovable boulders in a sacred site of the Matopos Hills. Tellingly, neither it nor memorials to the white colonial ‘brave heroes’ (who divided and crushed the indigenous black majority for decades) have been desecrated. One can't blame the last 20 years of economic decline under Mugabe on ‘the inequitable colonial heritage;’ nor can one overlook it.*

sive irrigation schemes prosper, then become hugely profitable.

In 1969 Ian Smith's newly independent Rhodesian Government declared “never in a thousand years” would blacks govern, and built its policy of segregation around the Land Tenure Act. In 1980 he surrendered power to majority rule, and reportedly offered only this advice to his victorious adversary Robert Mugabe: build more dams.

Mugabe's priority was not blue water, but white land. He promised to resettle 162,000 black families on white-owned farms. But due to the British-brokered peace accord, he couldn't force farmers to sell their land. Under “willing seller-willing buyer” the government could set prices even though it was also the buyer. Even so, within a decade this approach resettled only 55,000 families on 4 million acres, mostly

abandoned property or less valuable farms. By 1991, facing waning support, Mugabe threatened to redistribute half of all white land to black subsistence farmers, winning popular support while risking foreign disapproval, imports and investment.

Flexing their muscles, World Bank and International Monetary Fund bureaucrats stepped in and persuaded him first to try their Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), which essentially meant, “unleashing market forces,” (the same capitalist “shock therapy” they so confidently prescribed for the post-Soviet Union). Prices rose, the masses lost jobs, grew hungry, fled to cities. Crime rose and disenchantment with Mugabe grew.

All this doesn't defend Mugabe's ‘Big Man’ actions; it does set them in the context of past injustice. But the burden that falls on any current government is to break the cycles of history, not repeat them. Most recently Mugabe undermined what little credibility remained by proclaiming “one man, one farm” and then handing over several irrigation farms at a time to loyal government officials, who then removed their rent-a-warvets from farms like pawns from a chessboard.

Opposition MDC leaders have vowed, once in office, to turn communal lands into freehold (private) farms, recognize title deeds, prosecute officials who have leveraged their offices to forcibly gain land, and invest (or reinvest) in irrigation infrastructure.

attacked, bound and beaten to a pulp, just before he escaped into the dam, he recognized among his 21 would-be murderers the three boys he had been looking after.

“We can't have a simple ‘truth and reconciliation commission’ in this country,” said his wife Kerry, recounting her husband's horrific event, and the time her son was almost blown up by a makeshift grenade, and the time a neighbor was killed by being crushed against his

fence. “Not without justice first. They tried in South Africa, but without justice there was no reconciliation.”

Then Kerry paused. “Several months later, after we were forced off the farm, those three boys approached a [still-loyal] farm worker we paid to keep an eye on our farm. The boys were shaking with shame, and tears, and told him they couldn't live with the guilt of what they had done. They were upset by the new system. They had been pumped

up, consumed by the indoctrination. They wanted...they needed to apologize."

"Did you let them?" I asked after a silence.

Kerry shook her head. "The farm worker told them to fuck off. But when he told me what they did and what they said, I just wept uncontrollably."

When the time is right, though, the Kays will send word for the boys, meet with them, get statements and work up the ladder and prosecute those adults who had indoctrinated them.

I left wondering whether there was in fact a point to all the seemingly unreal politeness, decency, and genteel apologies. It allowed conditions for the possibility of coexistence between white and black and Asian tribes, between commercial and subsistence farmers, between urban and rural families. Despite the breakdown of law and order, people here could tell right from wrong. They just had to plug the dams, repair or replace the canals, get the pipes screwed back together. "The situation is not irreversible," proclaimed a Justice for Agriculture fact sheet, "as there are many commercial farmers prepared to return to the land under a legitimate and law-abiding government."

The elder Kays aren't sure; too many painful memories are now linked with their farm. But their 24-year-old son, studying in the U.K., called just the other night to say, "If grandpa could start the farm from nothing, I can restart it again from something."

* * *

Yet it was too late for some. Trust could not be restored in the psyche. Jenny Bickle's son lost his farm after armed war vets burst into the house during supper. He left with his wife and young daughters for the safety and schools of Australia. He won't be back.

Likewise the Jaansens, who had been the only farming family I had previously known in Zimbabwe (I had hired their eldest daughter for a position in Cape Town about the time when the first mobs showed up on their farm). They had fought to stay in their home, but eventually the menacing pressure and torment and unaccountable crime got to be too much. Now they try to coax a living from a small brewery and tire business, but mainly plan their coming exile from the country, at last.

"We considered leaving 23 years ago at independence," said Derek, "but stuck around, educated our kids. Whether it was the right decision or not, we have no regrets."

"But we're getting on in years," added his wife Emily. "We're just not ready to uproot and begin all over again even if they are ready to embrace us. We're too tired of starting up from scratch."

Over tea, we flipped through the family photo albums of the places in Zimbabwe that had held them for so long. I got a sense of how farming, perhaps more than any other activity, roots a people, a tribe, a civilization to a given landscape. And how it sounded to be scraped from it by force.

"You can't look back," sighed Emily, turning a page. She said it with emphasis, as if she had almost managed to convince herself. Later they fished out a map and brochure of northern Australia and pored over it trying to work up enthusiasm. They had visas and were bound for Broome. "Look at that picture," said Emily. "See? They've even got baobabs there. And with the escarpment in the background, we could almost be in Africa."

"Yes," said Derek. "The only thing missing is an elephant standing beside it." □

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