

Crisis in Zimbabwe: British military force poised to intervene

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Tensions between Britain and Zimbabwe continue to deepen at the opening of a round of talks designed to bring an end to the seizure of white-owned lands by supporters of President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF.

On the day the talks began, April 27, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that Britain had plans in situ for a military evacuation of British passport-holding whites and other Europeans and had a rapid response force stationed in neighbouring Mozambique. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook denied any knowledge of this, but Geoff Hoon, secretary of state for defence, confirmed it and refused to rule out the use of British troops. "If circumstances deteriorated so badly, there are certainly contingency plans in place where we would want to help British passport-holders to get to safety," he said.

A day of talks in London between ministers from the governments of Zimbabwe and Britain ended with a continuing row between the two sides. Cook said he had offered a £36 million aid package in which Britain would finance land reform in its former colony. The conditions for this aid were that the farm occupations be called off, with a return to the "rule of law", and that scheduled parliamentary elections be held with the participation of foreign observers.

A similar offer of aid—without these additional strings—was made by Britain and other Western governments in 1998. Cook complained that Zimbabwe had at that time agreed to abide by strict "transparency" criteria and to purchase land at market prices. The Zimbabwean delegation maintained that the finance promised had not been forthcoming at that time, and they consequently refused to accept the present deal.

Over the last few days supporters of Mugabe's ZANU-PF regime who have been occupying more than a thousand white-owned farms have turned from attacking the farmers and their families to assaulting the farms' black workers. There are more than 350,000 farm labourers, and the intimidation is designed to stop them and their families from voting for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Workers have been beaten up and their homes torched. Special powers have been taken by the Zimbabwean police force under the Law and Order Maintenance Act to ban political marches and rallies, a measure backed by the ZANU-PF government to suppress election campaigning by the MDC.

The land occupations were Mugabe's response to his defeat in a recent referendum on a new constitution which would have allowed him to hold the presidency for another two terms. They raised the stakes in a conflict in which the Western governments, led by Britain, and the International Monetary Fund have sought to break Mugabe's grip on power. The opposition MDC, which is allied to a section of the White landowners and supports IMF economic policies, has been promoted by Britain, the US and other Western powers.

For the last 20 years, since Zimbabwe emerged as an independent state from the British colony of Rhodesia, Mugabe and ZANU-PF have used

the land issue for election rhetoric, but taken no significant action on farm ownership. Over half the land in Zimbabwe, and all the best farming land, is owned by just 3 percent of the population, predominantly whites. This gross inequality is a legacy of the colonial period, when white settlers under Cecil Rhodes seized the country and took the best land for themselves.

Whilst a small amount of land seized in the occupations has been handed over to landless poor, the main purpose of the operation is to intimidate the opposition and undermine the MDC's support in the countryside, which is promoted by the white farmers. ZANU-PF once had its biggest base of support amongst the rural poor, and it was a particular setback to Mugabe to lose the constitutional referendum vote in these areas, despite the inclusion of a clause in the draft constitution that allowed for the seizure of the prime agricultural estates belonging to white landowners.

Mugabe came to power as a result of the 1980 Lancaster House Agreement with the British government. Independence was granted to Zimbabwe after 15 years of civil war, in which Mugabe's ZANU and Joshua N'Komo's ZAPU fought to overthrow the white racist regime of Ian Smith, which was backed by Britain. The settlement was based on Mugabe's agreement to preserve capitalist private property in mining and industry and ensure the continued economic grip of the white farmers over tobacco and other major agricultural exports.

A recent interview with Lord Carrington, then-foreign secretary under the Tory government of Margaret Thatcher, explains the importance of the 1980 deal for Britain. "But for that," he said, "there wouldn't be a single white farmer on any farm in Zimbabwe, or any white person in Zimbabwe at all. What was happening in 1979 was people being killed, black and white, and the place was in a state of collapse."

Asked if he thought there was any alternative in 1980 to putting Mugabe in power, he said, "No, I don't. Honestly. I was thinking about it and I honestly don't think so because we were very lucky to get an agreement on all sides at all. It was the only solution it was possible to get at that time. And really it started off rather well. For 10 years he [Mugabe] stuck to the provisions in the agreement."

For the last 20 years Mugabe has supported private enterprise, notwithstanding his previous claims to be a Marxist. The huge white-owned farms have been allowed to thrive, contributing a substantial part of Zimbabwe's export earnings. Land reform carried out in the 1980s was on the basis of a "willing seller-willing buyer" agreement, in which farmers who wanted to quit were compensated from a grant made by Britain. Only 65,000 farms for war veterans were established under this scheme, a small fraction of the number promised.

Dissatisfaction with Mugabe on the part of Britain and other Western governments has only developed in the last few years. They have come to see him as an obstacle to the wholesale adoption by Zimbabwe of free market economic policies, under the auspices of the IMF.

Whilst the ZANU-PF regime worked with Western support under an

IMF structural adjustment programme throughout the 1990s, a fall in export earnings from 1997 onwards drove the government deeper into debt. The IMF conditioned new loans with demands for more drastic cuts in government spending. It also demanded that Mugabe end his intervention in the war in the Congo, where Zimbabwe has 10,000 troops supporting the government of Laurent Kabila at a cost of £1 million a day.

Mugabe feared that complying with these conditions would undermine ZANU-PF's base of support, both in public sector employment and in the army, where Zimbabwe's generals were making lucrative deals for concessions on the Democratic Republic of Congo's mineral wealth.

Zimbabwe has since defaulted on numerous international loans. In response, South African, British and European banks have withdrawn lines of credit. In January Britain's export credits guarantee department (ECGD) revealed that the Zimbabwean government owed it £1.7 million from losses incurred by British companies dealing with the country's state-owned corporations, in particular, the National Oil Corporation of Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's foreign debt is estimated at \$4 billion (£2.5 billion), and is soaring. The country's inflation is running at 60 percent and unemployment stands at 50 percent.

For the last several months Britain has been in the forefront of efforts to destabilise Mugabe. Government ministers have used every occasion to denounce Mugabe's regime as corrupt, all financial aid has been cut, and the growth of the oppositionist MDC has been encouraged. Led by Morgan Tsvangirai and the trade unions, the MDC's main financial backers are white farmers, as well as businessmen of both races. In a recent interview Tsvangirai confirmed that the MDC's priority would be to deal with the country's debt, saying, "We would privatise and restore business confidence in Zimbabwe."

The MDC obviously does not spell out the implications of its pro-market programme for jobs and welfare spending in its campaign for support amongst workers and the rural poor. It has benefited from growing hostility to the Mugabe regime and gained support in reaction to the virtual collapse of the economy.

Mugabe responded to this pressure from Britain by making his appeal to ZANU-PF's traditional rural base. The land occupations are a calculated gamble, in which Mugabe seeks to capitalise on the social resentment of the rural poor. No doubt he believes he is in control of this movement. It relies on the civil war veterans' association and ZANU-PF members, funded by the government. The last thing Mugabe wants is a genuine mass movement of either the rural masses or urban working people: until two months ago land squatters were firmly dealt with by the police, and the only land distributed recently was to government ministers and top officials.

For the imperialist powers, however, and Britain in particular, the land occupations raise the spectre of that which they have always feared most—the emergence of a mass social movement in Africa challenging private property. The deaths of two white farmers were met with howls of indignation in Britain's media. For its part, the Blair government has veered between condemnations and appeals for resumed dialogue.

Much more is at stake than just Zimbabwe. Political settlements made throughout Southern Africa designed to preserve Western interests are under threat. In South Africa, 13 percent of the population own over 80 percent of the land. Already protesters from the northern town of Wakerstroom have picketed a government office, threatening land invasions, and there are reports of growing anger in other areas.

Since the African National Congress (ANC) came to power, only 6 percent of land claims have been settled and less than 1 percent of the land has been redistributed. One recent opinion poll showed 54 percent of South Africans supporting the land occupations in Zimbabwe—almost double the support in Zimbabwe itself.

South Africa's currency, the rand, has fallen by 10 percent, largely as a result of the conflict in Zimbabwe. Britain's *Financial Times*, referring to

the danger of a "Zimbabwe contagion", quoted one South African economist saying, "What it has done is put a large question mark in front of those who wanted to consider direct foreign investment."

Britain's dilemma is that the more they have sought to intervene or aid the MDC, the worse the situation has become. A warning of this outcome was made by Nelson Mandela in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper given while Mandela was on a recent visit to the UK.

Mandela expressed concern about Britain and America's bombing of Kosovo and Iraq. "Tony Blair is a young man I like very much," Mandela said. "But I am resentful about the type of thing that America and Britain are doing. They want now to be the policemen of the world and I'm sorry that Britain has joined the US in this regard."

He particularly resented their intervention in Africa: "It's a totally wrong attitude," he said.

Britain's appeal for Mugabe to be condemned by Africa's leaders met a sharp rebuff at the Victoria Falls meeting of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which comprises South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique. The heads of state gathered announced their support for Mugabe, declaring him to be a "champion of the rule of law", "committed to ending the violence".

Demanding that international donors finance land reform in Zimbabwe, Joaquim Alberto Chissano, president of Mozambique, said, "We think the donors, including Great Britain, have to deliver." South African President Thabo Mbeki said, "They have to fulfil their commitments."

According to press reports, Mugabe had promised to tone down his rhetoric and proceed with the elections, in return for the SADC leaders agreeing to lobby the IMF and other international lenders on his behalf.

This response has had the effect of polarising opinion even further in Britain and the West over what to do. The European Union have restricted themselves to formal condemnation of Mugabe's actions. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, after phoning Mugabe, assured reporters, "My sense is he's [Mugabe] taking the situation in hand and taking steps to defuse it and I've encouraged him to do that."

Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon—a New Zealander recently appointed with Britain's support—refused to comment on Mugabe's denunciation of white farmers as "enemies of Zimbabwe". "Election campaigns," he said, "in any country create their own tension."

Guardian columnist Isabel Hilton on April 19 gave voice to the political considerations of those urging restraint in Zimbabwe: "Mugabe's brand of nationalism depends on the anti-colonial rhetoric of two, even three decades ago," she wrote. But, she added, "It is rhetoric that still commands some support in Africa, combining as it does an acrimonious dialogue with the old colonial power and a conspicuous legacy in the white farmers or the injustices of the past."

"Given a chance to express their opinions in the recent referendum, the people of Zimbabwe showed that they were not persuaded by Mugabe's rhetoric.... What matters now is that Zimbabweans hold on to that perception.... There is little that Britain can do or say that will not add fuel to [Mugabe's] explosive argument and give him the final excuse to cancel the elections."

The United States is taking a harder line. The US State Department issued a statement deploring Mugabe's labelling of white farmers as "enemies" of the Zimbabwean people. "Such statements can only contribute to violence and the further erosion of the rule of law in Zimbabwe," spokesman James P. Rubin said.

The *Financial Times* is also more confrontational, expressing its displeasure at the African leaders in its editorial: "Southern Africa at Risk" The *Financial Times* writes: "Zimbabwe's crisis cannot be ring-fenced.... President Mbeki and other southern African leaders must stop behaving as if they were in Robert Mugabe's corner. By appearing to condone his tactics and his abuse of the rule of law, they undermine their own reputations. And unless they make a forthright defence of democratic

values, they risk joining him on a slippery slope to disaster.”

Tensions have risen further in the last few days, with Tsvangirai's warning that he will no longer turn the other cheek in response to ZANU-PF violence which has led to the death of at least five MDC members. "All those engaged in violence, the vice president, cabinet ministers, MPs, we know where they are," he warned.

Neither Mugabe nor the MDC can advance any genuine solution to the social and economic problems facing either the rural poor or the workers and unemployed of the cities. There is every possibility that Mugabe will yet make an agreement with Britain, but even if he were to carry out a division of some of the big farms, this would not create the basis for solving the enormous problems of poverty, backwardness and underdevelopment.

The policy of both Mugabe and the MDC is for the creation of a conservative social layer of small business farmers, a policy of "land reform" long supported and developed by the World Bank and policy think tanks in the West. Whether carried out by force, or by compensating white owners who want to leave, the creation of thousands of small farm businesses is a retrograde policy both economically and socially. Such small businesses are not economically viable, which is why many of the 65,000 farms set up by the Mugabe government between 1980 and 1990 have since collapsed.

The problems of poverty and unemployment can only be solved if they are taken up by the development of a socialist movement based on the working class and poor masses throughout southern Africa. About 7 million of Zimbabwe's 12 million population are rurally based, but more and more people have moved to the cities. Today twice the proportion of the population are urban dwellers than there were in 1960. The 350,000 of the rural population who are wage workers on the white farms account for well over a million, if their families are included. Many of the one million or so black-owned farms, moreover, are situated on the poorest land and rely on family members working either in the towns or for the white-owned estates.

None of the issues facing working people and poor masses in Southern Africa can be solved if the system of capitalist private property is allowed to continue. Mugabe's present disagreements with Britain do not change the bourgeois character of his government, which has demonstrated its subordination to Western capital for the past two decades.

Mugabe's perspective of working within the dictates of the major imperialist powers, whilst developing limited welfare measures, particularly education, has now failed. Britain is now seeking to replace the regime established by the Lancaster House Agreement with a more compliant administration through the MDC. The central issue facing the working people of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa is the construction of an independent socialist movement against both imperialism and its local representatives.



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