

Civil war looms in Zimbabwe

Chris Talbot
11 August 2000

Zimbabwe faces a growing danger of economic collapse and open civil war, provoked in large part by the efforts of the West to destabilise the regime of President Robert Mugabe.

Last week Mugabe declared that 3,000 white-owned farms, two thirds of the total, would be earmarked for seizure. This includes 800 farms already designated for takeover and distribution to the rural poor. A government statement said that the army would be brought in to move millions of peasants onto the land, half a million before the rainy season starts in a few weeks time.

The move came after a series of production stoppages organised by the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU), which represents Zimbabwe's wealthy white farmers, who were protesting government-backed farm occupations by the War Veteran's Association. The CFU actions anticipated a general strike called by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in support of the CFU, and more generally in opposition to political violence by the Mugabe regime. The MDC action won wide support in the urban areas.

The MDC, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, who also heads the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), is a self-styled reform party that openly supports the economic prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In announcing an expansion of farm seizures, Mugabe is responding to intensifying pressure from the Western powers. As retribution for Mugabe's support for land occupations, the US Congress recently passed the "Zimbabwe Democracy Act 2000", which commits Washington to use its influence to block all international aid and financial assistance for Zimbabwe. This comes on top of IMF-related sanctions already implemented.

Britain, meanwhile, has decided to beef up the African activities of its foreign intelligence service MI6. A new ministerial committee has been established, ostensibly to give advanced warning of coup attempts and threats of civil war in sub-Saharan Africa. The remit of the committee, headed by Secretary of State for International Development Clare Short, will undoubtedly include Zimbabwe. It has a £110 million a year "conflict prevention fund" to co-ordinate MI6 operations.

The MDC, which is mainly based in the cities and towns, has alienated the land-hungry and poverty-stricken people in the countryside by allying itself domestically with the wealthy white landowners and internationally with the US, Britain and

the IMF. Mugabe, for his part, has increasingly sought to channel rural discontent into hostility toward the cities and their working class population. The widening political division between town and country contains the potential for civil war. To explain how this has evolved, it is necessary to examine how the present standoff between Mugabe and the Western powers developed.

Mugabe came to power as a result of a 15-year armed struggle against the British-backed white regime in what was Rhodesia. While spouting Maoist slogans, he was the political representative of an aspiring national bourgeoisie, whose ambitions were thwarted by the racist nature of the regime. The 1980 Lancaster House Agreement signed by Mugabe with Britain preserved capitalist property relations and the domination of the key mining and agricultural sector by international corporations and a thin layer of rich white farmers. Land redistribution could only take place on the basis of a "willing seller" agreement, with compensation to be paid with the aid of British funds.

For a time, Mugabe was able to combine his government's defence of business interests with limited measures of social reform, ensuring a popular base for his regime. He was viewed by the West as a valuable ally and stabilising force on the African continent.

But over the past decade the IMF and World Bank have increasingly pressed for the imposition of restructuring programs involving substantial cuts in the public sector and the opening of the economy to private international capital. As export prices fell and Zimbabwe's foreign debt mounted, the IMF-dictated "reforms" led to growing poverty. A United Nations Development Programme study notes that the proportion of Zimbabweans living in poverty has increased from 40 percent to 75 percent over the last decade.

The sharp decline in living standards, 50 percent unemployment and the increasingly repressive character of Mugabe's rule provoked popular opposition and created conditions for violent social conflict. Aware of the extent of social and political tensions, Mugabe felt unable to meet IMF demands for further cuts in spending as well as the withdrawal of 10,000 Zimbabwean troops from the Congo, where they are supporting the regime of Laurent Kabila.

He could not accept measures that would undermine his rule. This was confirmed by a comment in the July 5 *New York*

Times by an anonymous Western economist, who said, “We all underestimated the social impact of the [IMF] program. And when we recognised it, we didn't get our act together quickly enough to help.”

Several years ago the Western powers, led by Britain and the US, decided that it was time to move against Mugabe. While cutting off virtually all funds and investment to Zimbabwe, they encouraged the formation of the MDC as an alternative leadership more responsive to their demands. The MDC is based on an alliance between wealthy white farmers and sections of black capitalists and the urban middle class, mainly drawn from a younger layer who grew up after the civil war.

The trade unions played the key role in the MDC's creation and have provided it with popular support amongst the urban working class. White farmers hold three of its top four leadership posts, but its general secretary is trade union leader Tsvangirai.

Mugabe offers no progressive response to Western threats and meddling. Instead, he is seeking to hold onto power by whipping up the legitimate anger of the rural poor not only against the privileged white farmers and their British backers, but also against the working class. Here he is given crucial assistance by the reactionary policies of Tsvangirai and the ZCTU.

For nearly two decades, Mugabe did little to effect land redistribution, resulting in an erosion of popular support in the countryside for his regime. In an attempt to reverse this decline and counter the provocations of Western governments and financial institutions, he organised earlier this year the occupation of hundreds of white farms, through the intermediary of the War Veterans association, which is controlled and financed by ZANU-PF. In general elections held in June of this year, the MDC won the majority of urban seats, but ZANU-PF won a narrow overall victory due to its support in rural seats.

Of ZANU-PF, Mugabe recently declared, “Our roots are in the soil and not in the factories”. His ruling clique has regularly denounced the population of the cities as stooges of the white farmers and the British government. This has taken on malignant forms, with attacks on agricultural workers on the large white-owned farms spreading to urban areas.

For the last month the army has been patrolling the poorest neighbourhoods, beating up people suspected of supporting the MDC. To some extent this accounts for the widespread urban support for the MDC's recent general strike, rather than any broad-based sympathy for the white farmers.

Mugabe has been able to increase his popularity throughout Africa by exploiting the land issue. Already 5,000 squatters are occupying land in the KwaZulu-Natal area in South Africa, inspired by the Zimbabwe land seizures. At the end of a recent two-day summit in Windhoek, Namibia, the 14-country Southern African Development Community endorsed Mugabe's stance on the land question and urged South African President

Mbeki to press Britain for compensation for farms seized by the Mugabe government.

However, the situation regarding land ownership in Africa epitomises the inability of any section of the national bourgeoisie to resolve the democratic and social problems produced by imperialist domination and economic underdevelopment. Two decades after formal independence, Zimbabwe's white farmers still own more than half the arable farmland, while the majority of rural blacks eke out an existence on small plots of poor quality, or are completely landless. Black South Africans, 75 percent of the population, own only 25 percent of the land and in Namibia 4,000 whites own about 44 percent of the total.

For its part, the MDC's policy on the land question is virtually identical to that of the white farm owners and the British government, insisting that white farmers be fully compensated for any land taken over.

While the status quo in the countryside is neither socially just nor economically viable, Mugabe's role is to exploit the land question as a political weapon without offering a rational policy for the development of agriculture, Zimbabwe's second major export industry after gold. The break-up of large and profitable estates and settlement of millions of families on plots with no water or agricultural equipment, and without access to cheap credit or subsidies, sets the stage for a social and economic disaster.

Moreover, despite his anti-Western rhetoric, Mugabe remains committed to the defence of big business interests at the expense of the working people. While pledging to expropriate white estates, his government has devalued the currency and promised further budget cuts and privatisation—measures entirely in line with IMF demands and the policies advocated by the MDC.

A just and viable solution to the land question can only be found through the development of a political and social movement of the workers and oppressed rural poor, independent of both rival camps within the national bourgeoisie. This requires a new socialist leadership, armed with a program for liberating Zimbabwe and the whole of Africa from the grip of the transnational corporations, the IMF and the Western banks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact