

# Correspondence on Africa

19 September 2001

## **The land question in South Africa**

*The following email was sent in response to the article “Zimbabwe land agreement reflects West’s concern over instability in Africa”, by Chris Talbot, published September 14 2001.*

Dear Editor,

Thanks for the article on the recent land deal in Zimbabwe. As someone who has worked in the land sector in South Africa for a number of years, I have been following these events quite closely. The *World Socialist Web Site* is possibly the only news service to throw any light on the social and political roots of the current problem. In South Africa, the state has implemented a land reform program, which commenced in 1994. This program consists of three elements; namely, restitution for those who lost land as a result of racially based legislation, redistribution for those who were prevented from owning land as a result of their race, and tenure reform for those living in insecure conditions.

On paper, it is a fairly good policy. However, reality has proved to be somewhat different. It soon became evident that the main constraint on the land reform program emanated from the property clause in the South African Constitution. This clause is the outcome of the compromise forged between the racist apartheid regime and the African National Congress. Essentially, it requires that land reform takes place on a willing seller/willing buyer basis. The ANC’s adherence to its corporate-friendly economic policy also means that a very limited budget is available to meet the massive land hunger existing in this country.

Initially, the redistribution policy worked on the basis of grants awarded to households. This grant was R15,000 in total, but was later revised upwards to R16,000. Groups of landless people were encouraged to club together to buy land, as the paltry amount of R16,000 was far too little to purchase agricultural land of meaningful size. The outcome of this policy was the formation of subsistence farming-oriented black settlements on small patches of land amidst a sea of white-owned farms. In a number of

cases, the desire to produce showcase projects resulted in particularly poor planning, leading to a number of completely disastrous projects that have virtually collapsed. It is not clear how people’s lives have been improved by this program.

The restitution program was also plagued by a number of blockages resulting in a very slow processing of the 65,000 land claims submitted before the cut-off date in 1998. Most of the awards to date have consisted of cash compensation. Ironically, it is the better-off claimants, namely, those who were landowners before dispossession, who have benefited the most from this. The majority of claimants in rural areas are people who occupied either public or private land as tenants. The right which they lost is seen as being worth less than the loss of the right of ownership, therefore, compensation awarded to ex-tenants is negligible. This is despite the fact that tenants faced greater hardship than owners after dispossession. In most cases, they were forcibly removed into Group Area ghettos where appalling conditions prevailed and, in many cases, continue to prevail.

The tenure reform program made virtually no progress. Presently, there are millions of South Africans who reside on state-owned and private land with no guaranteed security of tenure. The poorest sections are the most vulnerable to eviction or loss of rights. By 1998, it had become clear that the land reform program was not going to yield the expected result; namely, the redistribution of 30 percent of South Africa’s agricultural land within five years. With the advent of the Mbeki era, all pretence of welfare policies was dropped and the government proceeded to ruthlessly implement its macro-economic policy.

The land reform program was overhauled and a revised goal of redistributing 30 percent of agricultural land within a 15-year period was released. The thrust of the policy also changed, with a focus on creating a commercial black farming sector. The system of grants was altered so that a potential beneficiary would have to make an “own contribution” of a minimum of R5, 000.

Although this does not seem much, it is a staggering amount of money to a farmworker who may be earning less than R400 per month. Although the state maintains that this contribution may also be made in kind (labour, goods), it is vague on how this can be arranged. It is clear that this policy prejudices the poorest sections of rural society and will lead to greater inequality.

The tenure reform program, although still in disarray, is receiving some attention. However, it seems that measures will be introduced to effectively privatise large tracts of state land. Although communal land holding entities are being proposed, it is clear that this is nothing more than private ownership for a group. In many instances, the state will be dealing with extremely impoverished, and in some cases traumatised communities. It is not clear how such groups of people are going to hang onto their land when it is opened up to market forces. We can expect to see a new category of landless people being created in the future. In the final analysis, the current land reform program in South Africa is inadequate, and has succeeded only in temporarily diverting the frustration and anger of the millions of impoverished people in rural areas.

South Africa's adherence to free market economics means that the resources necessary to alleviate the plight of this country's rural poor will simply not be forthcoming. As anger and resentment grow, opportunistic groupings, such as the Pan African Congress, will tap into these emotions. However, it is evident that they too have no real solution for the problem.

Yours truly,

EG

South Africa

### **The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea**

*The following correspondence was sent in response to the article "Two letters on Eritrea and a reply", published September 7 2001.*

You are absolutely right in your analysis. I wish Mr. Mountain would state the name of the government critic he saw on government TV. This is an absolute fabrication. Many government critics and those accused of being against the government are snatched at night and their whereabouts is not known. Their families are not allowed to ask and if they do they risk their lives. Those who were able to criticize the government openly were once prominent figures of PFDJ/EPLF. Even these people are not featured in the government media. To claim Eritrea under the EPLF is a socialist country is actually

laughable. EPLF is begging the USA to use the Dahlak archipelago and surrounding island as a military base. Mr Mountain does not speak for the majority of Eritreans or Eritrea. He speaks only for the ruling elite in Eritrea. As such his claim to knowledge of the country needs to be taken with pinch of salt.

Sincerely,

J.

Thank You.

A well written article with a good insight into the subject. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been one of the major disasters of our time. Being an Ethiopian in the Diaspora I know how strong the propaganda has been. Mr Mountain has always been there, clapping and encouraging the slaughtering of the brotherly and sisterly people. God give all of us peace.

Sincerely,

ES

I am writing to thank you for response you sent to Mr. Mountain. It was a shameful war and should not be condoned but condemned.

Sincerely,

I.

Your response to Thomas Mountain was very good. I am an Eritrean. I have many times in the past debated with this airhead called Thomas. Let me tell you that this man is really extremely dumb. I mean so dumb that Americans should be ashamed to send this man abroad. Of course, he doesn't represent Americans, but I just want you to know that I have never EVER seen someone in my life who is so stupid and so brainless. As for the Eritrean government, this dumbbo claims that it's democratic, but as you know, it is a one-man sectarian dictatorship. The incumbent dictatorship is even worse than North-Korea and Iraq.

Regards,

A.



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