

Zimbabwe land agreement reflects West's concern over instability in Africa

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The agreement made at the Commonwealth conference in Abuja, Nigeria last week over the escalating land occupations reflects the growing concern by the Western powers over a dispute that has continued for the last 18 months. It is also the product of increasing pressure from the governments of Africa to settle the issue, due to fears that it will destabilise the whole region.

The agreement was reached between the Zimbabwean foreign minister and ministers representing Britain, Canada and Australia. Its key broker was Olusegun Obasanjo, President of Nigeria. Also present at the special committee meeting were ministers from Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Jamaica.

Zimbabwe has agreed to call off the occupations by thousands of squatters led by the war veterans that have taken over about 1,700 of the 4,500 large white-owned farms, making up much of the prime land in the country. It has agreed to move occupiers off land that was not “designated” and put them on “legally acquired land” and to speed up the process of “de-listing” farms that it does not intend to take over under the supervision of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In return Britain has “reaffirmed its commitment to make a significant financial contribution” to a land reform programme and will encourage other Western donors to do the same. No figure was agreed. Britain, Australia and Canada said they would also “respond positively” to requests for supporting elections and “continue to contribute to poverty reduction programmes.”

On paper there is little new in this agreement, since Britain has previously offered a small amount (£35 million) for land reform in which the white owners were compensated. The promises of such paltry aid mean little for a country that is on the verge of economic collapse, has had its lines of credit cut off, and is under threat of sanctions from the United States and the European Union. Conversely a recent announcement by Zimbabwe's agriculture minister, claiming that most of the white farms (over 70 percent) are now designated for government acquisition, raises the question of what exactly is the criteria for “de-listing” farms. President Mugabe and Zimbabwean ministers have given commitments before to abide by the “rule of law” and to call off occupations in the tortuous course of the dispute.

Since the agreement was signed, the war veterans have said that they will not accept it. But the fact that the Zimbabwean regime signed the agreement in the presence of key players in African politics, with Britain dropping its confrontational posture, makes it likely that there will be some attempt by the Zanu-PF government to at least rein in the war veterans.

The broader concerns of the Western governments and African leaders are made clear by the reference in the text of the agreement to the “crisis” in Zimbabwe that “poses a threat to the stability of the entire sub-region and the continent at large.” Nigerian Foreign Minister Sule Lamido stressed this point, saying, “Africa cannot afford another war, not least a racial war or one with racial undertones”. It was further underlined at a

meeting in Harare this week of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) of regional leaders, including South African President Thabo Mbeki. The current chair of SADC, President Bakili Maluzi of Malawi, stated, “the economic and political problems Zimbabwe is facing now could easily snowball across the entire southern African region.”

South Africa is the main economy in the region—its GDP is more than ten times that of Zimbabwe—and it is stepping up pressure on the Mugabe regime to regain some stability and improve relations with the Western powers. The African National Congress (ANC) government controls most of Zimbabwe's fuel and electricity supplies. Since the beginning of this year, the South African rand has fallen by 12 percent against the dollar, as funds have been pulled out. While not wishing to be seen attacking their neighbour too openly, the ANC is painfully aware that international investors are citing the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe as one reason for pulling out of South Africa.

Growing opposition to the free market policies of the ANC government is also cited as a major problem by investors. This summer there have been strikes in South Africa by thousands of workers in the auto, power and other industries as well as a two-day strike by millions against the government's privatisation programme. In Zimbabwe also there have been strikes in the education and health sector, as well as in the steel industry, in which two pickets were shot dead by police and two more have subsequently died of injuries. These strikes have taken place despite the efforts of the trade unions to keep action to a minimum.

Whilst the land issue is being manipulated by the Zanu-PF regime in Zimbabwe for its own ends, there are legitimate aspirations amongst millions of rural poor and landless people in southern Africa to take back the land stolen from them by white settlers under colonialism or white minority rule.

The Mbeki government is fully aware that the continued ownership of the richest farmland by a tiny, mainly white elite is only the most visible expression of the failure of either Zanu-PF or the ANC to redress inequalities of wealth in both countries. South Africa fears that land protests could emerge at home, where black people own only 15 percent of the land. Despite laws allowing for “restitution”, where land can be returned to those who can prove it was seized under apartheid, little redistribution of land has taken place since the ANC came to power. Several thousand from a coalition of landless peoples organisations lobbied the racism conference in Durban, and South Africa, making world headlines when the government evicted squatters at Bredell, near Johannesburg in July. In Namibia also there are 4,000 large commercial mainly white-owned farms and the Namibia Farmer's Union representing black farmers has protested that only 35,000 farmers have been resettled since independence in 1990.

Nationalising the land was a central plank of Zanu's policy in the civil war it conducted against the British-backed white supremacist government of what was then called Rhodesia. On that basis it won mass support in the

rural areas. In the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement that ended the war, however, Zanu made clear its real agenda—the taking of power by a narrow black elite while accepting the continued domination of the Western powers over southern Africa, and collaborating with the white farmers and mine owners in developing a capitalist economy.

Over the following two decades there were many land occupation movements, but despite rhetoric from the Mugabe leadership that white farms would be confiscated, the police evicted those involved. Only a relatively small number of landless peasants have been allowed to move on to “Resettlement Land”. Over 20 years, about 60,000 small farms have been created, many of which have not survived, and these were mainly on the poorest land. (In total about seven million of the 12 million population are rurally based, with approximately one million black farms, mainly very small and without modern equipment). Much of this resettlement land was purchased at market prices from the white commercial farmers under the terms of the Lancaster House agreement. The white farmers, who own the bulk of the best quality land occupied by about 4,500 farms, were encouraged to stay in business, producing about a third of the country’s export earnings.

After gaining independence, virtually all of the nationalist regimes in Africa enjoyed a limited economic expansion. The World Bank accepted nationalisations and even welfare state measures in the 1960s and 70s as a way of countering the influence of the Soviet Union. But the nationalist elites had little or no genuine independence from Western imperialism, and by the 1980s they had largely accepted IMF-World Bank structural adjustment programmes. Free market measures, the privatisation of the state sector and the opening up of economies to the world market became the norm. The result for most of the population of sub-Saharan Africa has been devastating. From 1987 to 1998, for example, the number of people living in poverty (on less than a dollar a day) has increased from 217 million to 291 million, roughly half the total population, according to the World Bank’s own figures.

In Zimbabwe, the position was somewhat different because the white minority regime had set about building up its own economy under the siege conditions of the civil war and sanctions. In the 1980s, Zanu-PF was able to utilise this local wealth as thousands of white settlers fled the country. Welfare measures were expanded, in particularly in the education sector. For a period the new small commercial farms that were set up and supported by the regime were regarded as an African success story. But by the 1990s the Mugabe government had to accept the domination of the global economy and abandoned its pretence that it was going through a “national democratic phase” of a revolution that would at some future date enter a “socialist” stage.

Accepting IMF structural adjustment meant opening up its industry to foreign competition, particularly that of South Africa after the end of sanctions that had been imposed during apartheid. As well as closing down sections of local industry, the state sector was cut back and opened up to privatisation. This precipitated a sharp economic decline, compounded by falling prices for tobacco, one of its main exports.

The impact on the population was dire. To give just one statistic, infant mortality shot up from 52 to 69 per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 1997. As the level of debt increased the IMF demanded that the government made further expenditure cuts.

Zimbabwe also entered the war in the Congo, supporting the Kabila regime in return for diamonds and other natural resources. The Zimbabwean army organised its own business ventures, cutting across Western interests that wanted its own mining corporations to exploit the region.

Eventually in 1999, negotiations between the Mugabe regime and the IMF broke down, cutting off Western credit and forcing the economy into even steeper decline. The Zimbabwean government was not prepared to see its public finances, which stood at the core of its system of political

patronage, slashed even further.

In response to the economic devastation produced by the IMF measures imposed by the Zanu-PF regime a wave of strikes, protests and land occupations developed during the 1990s. In the absence of any alternative socialist policy, however, the urban opposition to the regime was dominated by a coalition made up of the trade union bureaucracy and business interests, including sections of the white farmers. Organised in the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), these pro-imperialist forces nearly succeeded in winning a majority in the elections of June last year. Backed by the Western powers, with Britain at the forefront, the MDC advocates a crash programme of free market measures, claiming that Zimbabwe’s virtual economic collapse is due entirely to the corruption of Zanu-PF and its failure to strictly apply IMF measures.

It was the impasse with the IMF and the growth of support for the MDC that led the Zanu-PF regime in 2000 to give its backing and financial assistance to the war veterans movement and to step up the farm occupations. It was both an election strategy—since Zanu’s base of support was traditionally in the rural areas where the demand for land was popular—and, more importantly, a bargaining ploy to pressurise the Western powers. Scenes of white farmers being driven off their land by gangs armed with clubs and axes were intended to force a renegotiation of credit terms.

Whilst there has been rhetoric from Mugabe and Zanu-PF leaders that this was a return to the national liberation war, there has been no pretence that there is any possibility of a return to the nationalised economy of the 1980s. Despite the pompous speeches about the importance of the land question, Zanu-PF has no coherent strategy for agricultural development, and merely hopes to get Britain and the West to back off from their efforts to topple Mugabe and renew the supply of monies and credit, most of which will go to Zanu-PF supporters. The Mugabe regime has also attempted to defend the position of the elite and military top brass by negotiating loans from Libya, and extending its business operations in the Congo—which now includes logging in vast areas of tropical rainforest.

Many of the farm occupations have taken the form of intimidation and sabotage, breaking up mechanised large-scale estates without any provision of alternative resources. The Zimbabwe Farmers Union (ZFU), representing about 300,000 small farmers, has pointed out that Zanu-PF has even abandoned its own agricultural programme and is doing nothing about providing an infrastructure for the occupiers.

Over 300,000 farm labourers that work on the commercial farms are now facing not just unemployment, but homelessness. Many of them are immigrants from neighbouring countries and are being driven out of their homes by the war veterans’ occupation, with hundreds now camped along the roadside next to the occupied farms. As well as the eight white farmers killed in the occupations, 28 black farm workers have also died.

The reckless policies being pursued by the Mugabe regime do risk provoking a civil war, but not the “race war” cited by Nigerian Foreign Minister Sule Lamido. The conflict threatened by the combination of Western efforts to destabilise Zimbabwe and Mugabe’s demagogic use of the land question is between the rural poor, particularly the most oppressed and backward sections of the peasantry on one side, who at this point are backed by the police and army, and the workers and poor in the cities. Mugabe has had some success in portraying urban workers opposed to his regime as “imperialist stooges”, thanks to the pro-Western policies pursued by the trade unions and the MDC. The dangers posed by such a development are acute, in a country where desperation is created by the fear of economic collapse and food shortages.

The only alternative to the disastrous leadership of the African bourgeoisie, whether or not it continues to espouse the rhetoric of “national liberation” like Zanu-PF, or gives open support to the free market like the MDC, is for the working class of the region to develop an independent socialist movement that would win the backing of millions of

small peasants and rural poor. A socialist policy for the resolution of the land question would first and foremost recognise the necessity for democratic control and social ownership not just of agriculture but of industry and banking also, and on a continental scale and ultimately global scale.

There is no possibility of an agricultural development being made in Africa without a repudiation of the huge levels of debt owed to the Western banks. It is also necessary to develop a plan for the economy that provides for the whole population, rather than being primarily a source of minerals and raw materials that from colonial times on has benefited only Western corporations and a tiny elite. Such a plan would recognise the legitimate aspirations of millions of poor people for land in southern Africa, whilst encouraging the development of the most productive techniques to provide food for the rapidly expanding urban centres. Throughout much of Africa, the main rural production is subsistence agriculture, which cannot meet the needs of an expanding population.

Mechanisation, provision of chemical and organic fertilisers and pesticides, as well as making available scientific expertise has long been recognised as basic requirements to increase food production in Africa. Small-scale private producers should be assisted with interest-free loans, but the ultimate requirement must be the development of the most advanced large-scale agricultural production, run collectively and socially owned, as opposed to the present profit-based large farms that are owned by a wealthy and mainly white elite.

See Also:

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