

New Crackdown on White Farmers

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Since historic political settlement was signed, a wave of forced evictions has been reported. White farmers in Zimbabwe say that since a power-sharing deal between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, was signed, many have come under renewed pressure to leave their land.

The Commercial Farmers Union, CFU – a grouping of white farmers – said that military officials and self-styled former guerrillas of Zimbabwe's war of independence invaded 42 more white-owned farms within hours of the agreement being signed between President Robert Mugabe and MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai on September 15.

“Since [then], there has been an increased number of disruptions on farms, with new alleged beneficiaries arriving on many properties and claiming immediate access to the homesteads and crop lands, despite the fact there is no vacant possession [right to possess land in which there is no current occupant],” said a CFU report covering the period from September 17 to 19.

The report also noted that there has been an upsurge in the number of prosecutions for alleged offences under the Gazetted Land (Consequential Provisions) Act, which was passed in December 2006, and makes it illegal for a farmer to remain on a farm listed for acquisition. In the Rotten Row Court in Harare, four white farmers face prosecution under the act for defying orders to hand over their farms to black settlers.

“All [court] summonses were issued after the signing of the recent power-sharing agreement,” CFU president Doug Taylor-Freeme told IWPR.

Since the onset of Mugabe's land invasions in 2000 – when land owned by white farmers was confiscated and given to poor black Zimbabweans and political supporters – only about 280 of an original 4,500 white commercial farmers remain on their farms.

Observers say that ZANU-PF hardliners now appear to be trying to seize the remaining farms before a new government is formed following the political settlement.

“It would seem the intention is to grab the farms before the announcement of the new all-inclusive government, which might be very soon,” said Alex Dhewa, a businessman and political analyst.

“The target obviously would be the remaining white farmers.”

John Worswick, head of white farmers' pressure group, Justice for Agriculture, JAG, agrees that there would appear to be a last-ditch attempt to remove those few white farmers still on their land.

“At the moment, no remaining farmer appears to be safe from...what appears to be a final clean-up of any remaining white-owned land in Zimbabwe,” said Worswick.

“Although considering there has not been an active government for six months, the legality of [the seizures] is questionable, they are having a huge destabilising effect on confidence and hence production.”

Zimbabwe has been without a government since March, when Tsvangirai won the first round of the presidential election, but fell short of an absolute majority. Mugabe later won a controversial June 27 presidential runoff unopposed after Tsvangirai withdrew, citing state-sponsored violence against his supporters.

Following the elections, Mugabe, who has led Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980, has been forced to share power with rivals under pressure from an imploding economy.

The president insisted on safeguards in the power-sharing agreement he has entered with the opposition, designed to ensure that his land reforms are irreversible. For example, Article V, Clause 5.5 deals with “the irreversibility of...land acquisitions and redistribution”.

The Mugabe government has long claimed that the opposition, which it frequently accuses of being a puppet of former colonial power Britain, was planning to reverse the changes in land ownership in the country if it seized power.

However, the agreement also says that the parties agree to “conduct a comprehensive, transparent and non-partisan land audit.... for the purpose of establishing accountability and eliminating multiple farm ownerships”.

Yet senior officials in his government and in the army, who benefited immensely through his patronage networks, are staunchly opposed to the power-sharing deal, which they fear could reverse the land redistribution programme. Farmers suspect them of leading the latest invasions.

Worswick said he believed that recent evictions were planned by a clique of ZANU-PF hardliners – rather than initiated through official channels – as one of the invaders reportedly turned up with an offer letter apparently signed by a minister and dated September 2.

Because the government declared two years ago that farm seizures were at an end, offer letters – in which the ministry offers farmland to prospective black farmers, who then use these offers to force white farmers off their land – issued after 2006 are suspect.

As head of JAG, Worswick is informed of all new farm seizures, and he said even farms covered by Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements, BIPPAS, were being invaded in the latest round of evictions. BIPPAS are government-to-government agreements, which ensure that citizens of one country who invest in another are protected by the host government from any form of harassment. Under these, their investments are supposed to be immune to seizures.

Observers say a further threat to white productive farmers could come from Mugabe’s promise during a speech on September 11 to give land to those traditional chiefs who had so far not benefited from the land reform programme.

The chiefs have mobilised support for Mugabe in the rural areas.

“All [of these factors] are having a detrimental effect on the already reduced level of production of strategic crops this forthcoming season – which in fact is already upon us,” said Worswick.

A shortfall in the harvest can only do more damage to Zimbabwe's economy, which has been on a downward spiral since the turn of the decade when Mugabe first launched his controversial land-reform programme.

There is now diplomatic pressure to end the seizures of the remaining white-owned farms.

IWPR has seen a diplomatic note sent by the South African embassy in Harare to the Zimbabwe government, and copied to Police Commissioner-General Augustine Chihuri.

The note reveals that South African ambassador to Zimbabwe Mlungisi Mkhali has sought the intervention of Zimbabwe's deputy foreign affairs minister Reuben Marumahoko in halting further farm seizures.

It makes reference to the south-eastern lowveld of the country where South African conglomerate Tongaat Hullet owns vast sugar cane plantations which are reportedly under siege by ZANU-PF militants.

Digby Nesbitt, a farmer from that area, who grows seed cane for the South African company's sugar mill, said he was struggling to head off his eviction by Assistant Police Commissioner Edmore Veterai.

Nesbitt told IWPR that he has been under siege from Veterai – who is already in contempt of three court orders to vacate Nesbitt's farm, as well as an interim relief order granted by the Southern African Development Community, SADC, tribunal in Windhoek, Namibia.

Sitting around a green-baize card table in the Harare Club, Nesbitt – who had come to the capital to seek government intervention – said he could find little cause for optimism.

Yet the farmer, who has lived in Zimbabwe for decades, said he was resolute that he will not move an inch from his farm where he runs an orphanage for disadvantaged children.

A fellow white farmer, who preferred to remain anonymous, said he thought the reported seizures were an attempt to grab land before the new government comes in.

“I even doubt the authenticity of the offer letters [the invaders] are brandishing. We have it on good authority that the last offer letters were issued at [the ZANU-PF national congress in] Goromonzi in December 2006. So these offer letters they have are fake,” he said.

“This is ethnic cleansing, pure and simple,” said another farmer, who declined to be named.

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Location: Zimbabwe

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/new-crackdown-white-farmers>