

Nigeria Welcomes White Farmers

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Victims of Mugabe's land confiscations breath new life into moribund farming economies of other African countries.

Graham Hatty, a 65-year-old Zimbabwean who has spent the past 41 years farming at Norton, 35 kilometres west of Harare, is this week packing to leave for Nigeria and a new life there as a pioneer agriculturalist.

He is one of a team of fifteen white Zimbabwean farmers courted vigorously by Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, the head of the African Union, to settle in Nigeria to open up commercial farming. The farmers all lost their properties in Zimbabwe in President Robert Mugabe's land confiscation programme over the past five years.

Hatty and the pioneer party's leader, 46-year-old Alan Jack, were told by Obasanjo on a visit to Abuja, the Nigerian capital, from which they have just returned, "Why leave Africa and go to Australia? We do not want to take away what is good for Zimbabwe from Zimbabwe, but I believe that it is in the best interests of Africa that you do not leave this continent. The more of you who come to Nigeria the better."

Obasanjo plans eventually to settle at least two hundred white Zimbabwean farmers along the banks of the huge Niger River.

Graham's wife Judy, who has surveyed the one thousand hectares of virgin bush she and her husband have been allocated alongside the upper reaches of the Niger in the western state of Kwara, told IWPR, "We have gone from being considered enemies of the state in our own country to being treated like royalty in another."

The Hattys were expelled from their 360 hectare Melton Park Farm in January last year when Mugabe allocated the property to the newly retired head of Zimbabwe's National Defence Force, General Vitalis Zvinavashe.

Melton Park was one of the best run and most productive farms in Zimbabwe. The Hattys grew maize, seed maize, wheat and soya beans for the local market and exported runner beans and sugar snap peas to Europe.

"When the farm was taken from us we lost everything," said Judy Hatty, who moved with Graham into a small flat in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, after Zvinavashe's takeover. "We have no pension and no insurance. Melton Park was our identity. It was our past, our present and it was to be our future. We had built a school on the farm with seven classrooms, not only for our own workers but for other local people. Now it is closed. The programme we built up to support local AIDS orphans has died."

However, the family, like many white Zimbabwean farmers, have not lost their tenacity and their abiding passion for farming. So, when the Nigerian government laid out the red carpet for a new venture, the Hattys were among the first to sign up.

The original idea to keep the white Zimbabweans farming in Africa came from Bukola Saraki, the dynamic 36-year-old governor of Kwara State, who is spearheading a national drive to wean Nigeria from oil-based revenues, which have totalled more than 200 billion US dollars over the past 40 years.

"In Kwara we don't have oil, but we have a vast amount of virgin land, 2.3 million hectares, available for agriculture, which has the potential to provide jobs and bring down the cost of food," said Governor Saraki from Ilorin, the state capital.

"White farmers were having problems with Robert Mugabe. They saw themselves as Africans and wanted to stay in Africa. We [Obasanjo and Karaki] thought: if you've got what it takes to make it in commercial farming, the opportunities are here."

The migration of the Hattys, Alan Jack and other white Zimbabwean farmers such as Alain Faydeherbe, William Hughes and Dan Swart, is the latest and most remarkable chapter in the exodus of white Zimbabwean farmers - shown the door by Mugabe and vilified as greedy racists - to other African countries where they are breathing new life into moribund farming economies.

Zambia, an importer of maize, its staple food, for the first 36 years of independence, has become a maize exporter since it began giving land to some 200 white Zimbabweans from 2001 onwards.

Karaki said Zimbabwe's loss is Nigeria's gain. Kwara State has given the Zimbabweans pioneer status, which brings with it many financial incentives, including investment by the government of some 1.6 million dollars in irrigation, electricity, roads and housing around an impoverished village called Shonga in the north of the state.

The Zimbabweans have been given initial 25 year leases on their land. Karaki said he is also creating an export cargo hub at Ilorin Airport so that commercial crops can be flown to European markets. Easy term loans will be extended and the Zimbabweans can import equipment duty free.

"Within ten years our airport will be busy with agricultural exports and our young [Nigerian] chaps coming out of university will think about going into farming," said Karaki, who, when elected governor in 2003, launched a Back to the Land strategy.

He was appalled that Nigeria, despite its abundant land, spends more than 1.6 billion dollars a year on food imports, including rice, sugar, chicken and milk, which it should be producing itself.

He said he quickly realised that the agricultural economy was composed of peasant farmers, stuck at the rake and hoe stage, with little exposure to modern technology and mechanisation. "They were producing low yields, with no money to buy tractors or inputs," said the governor. "We brought in foreign experts to develop oil in the Niger Delta. I realised we'd need foreign experts to kick start our agriculture plans."

Pinching herself with excitement, surprise and some trepidation as she supervised the loading of packing cases, Judy Hatty said, "This is a giant leap into the unknown and it is pretty scary, but we have got so much to gain and so little to lose. We were welcomed with open arms and treated like Hollywood film stars by President Obasanjo, who told us: 'You are the best farmers in Africa. Don't leave Africa. Africa needs you.'"

Their departure, initially to a tent while boreholes are drilled and the foundation of their new farmhouse is laid, is heavily tinged with sadness. To the last, the Hattys have been involved with their multiracial community church at Norton, which cares for sick children of local farmworkers.

Recently, a nine-year-old boy with a badly shattered leg was left untreated in the local hospital for nearly a

week while his mother tried to scrape together money for doctors' fees. The Hattys and the church stepped in and raised the money and bought the equipment that finally persuaded doctors to set the little boy's leg.

The Hattys will be accompanied on their journey across Africa by their 56-year-old neighbour William Hughes, who used to be regularly voted Zimbabwe's top dairy farmer, producing 5000 litres of milk a day. "I was forced off my farm after death threats began," said Hughes, who had spent more than three decades breeding the perfect genetic stock from Holsteins for high milk yields in semi-tropical Zimbabwe.

"But, under Mugabe, if some local bigwig wants your farm it's curtains for you. I lost my farm and my life's work. But now I'm damned well going to build the first modern dairy in Nigeria."

With her move imminent from the country she loves and that has been her lifelong home, Judy Hatty said she was not bitter, just saddened. "I thought I would die of a broken heart," she said. "But now it is time to move on."

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