

Poor Zimbabwean Whites Hit Hard Times

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Most used to work on white commercial farms, becoming destitute following the land reform programme. Jim Rose, who was struck and killed a few weeks ago by a motorist while riding on his bicycle to Harare from his home in Chitungwiza 30 kilometres away, was considered rather odd by the standards of modern Zimbabwe.

A white man who said he was born in New York, he was a retired civil engineer who fifteen years ago married Mavis, a black woman. Their family home is in a working-class residential area called Unit L in Chitungwiza.

His frail looks belied an inner strength that enabled him to cycle an average 60 kilometres daily from Chitungwiza to Harare, and back, and also to get used to living in a poor neighbourhood often characterised by flowing raw sewage. The people of Chitungwiza grew to embrace him as their own and nicknamed him "Murewa", an affectionate moniker given without prejudice to white people who are comfortable living among blacks.

"Rhodies" - as whites who long for the old pre-Zimbabwe days of white-ruled Rhodesia are known - called such white people "niggerboeties" [nigger lovers] and despised them.

Jim was seen putting on the same colour of clothing every day. His widow Mavis told IWPR her husband's wardrobe had more than ten sets of identical clothes. "He just felt that those were the type of clothes suited to him and his community," she said.

Jim was part of a new group of people in President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe informally classified as "poor whites".

A University of Zimbabwe sociologist, who preferred not to be named, told IWPR, "In Rhodesia whites generally were a privileged class. It was impossible to see a poor white person because of a philosophy of 'esprit de corps'. If one white man hit hard times the others would come to the rescue. They had an elaborate set of homes for all sorts of people where the poor ones were either hidden or rehabilitated.

"Since independence this system has broken down, firstly because the new order saw it as discriminatory but, secondly, because the rich whites became fewer and fewer as they either emigrated or saw their fortunes wane as the Zimbabwean economy began to falter in the 1990s."

The number of poor whites began to increase at the turn of the millennium, mainly with the advent of Mugabe's land reform programme, in which vast swathes of commercial agricultural land were confiscated from white farmers.

"Most of the poor whites we are seeing on the streets of Harare used to live on farms where they were employed, [largely] to supervise black labour," said the sociologist. "Most of them are of limited education and therefore cannot stand on their own. So when the white commercial farmers who supported them were chucked off the farms these white guys found themselves destitute."

Indications are that there are more poor whites than are generally evident on the streets. "Most of them are fiercely proud and would rather remain destitute in their homes than be seen on the streets," continued the sociologist. But at a shopping centre in Eastlea, just outside Harare's central business district, the evidence is stark. Five destitute white men, aged between thirty and sixty, have thrown pride and caution to the wind and beg openly. They marshal cars into parking bays and offer to clean and guard them while the owners do their shopping. The shoppers are mostly well-to-do black people and the poor whites do not seem to mind begging from blacks.

One shopper told IWPR how an elderly white woman approached him asking for money. "She said her husband, a pensioner, had a serious back pain which needed urgent medication but they could not afford it on his pension," according to the shopper, who said he was unable to guess whether this was a genuine case of need or whether the woman was trying to con him. He however gave her some money and she moved on to another customer to beg more money. "She looked like somebody with an alcohol problem and I feared the money I gave was not for her husband's medication," said the man.

Zimbabwean pensioners of all races are the hardest hit by the seven-year-long economic recession. Their lives' work has been eaten away by the country's astronomical inflation, which in the early days of 2007 reached a record level of 1,281 per cent, by far the highest in the world. Most pensioners live on less than 10,000 Zimbabwe dollars a month [4 US dollars at the almost universally-used black market rate, which reflects realistically the true value of Zimbabwe's currency] - enough to buy only ten loaves of bread. For all intents and purposes, pensioners are living at the extreme ranges of penury.

But do poor whites form a special class that needs special attention?

"It's a question that demands a lot of sober thought," said a veteran black journalist in Harare, who asked not to be named. "I think the answer is 'yes', but then there are a lot of other poor people who need attention. In Arcadia, for example, the Coloured (mixed race) community is falling apart because of grinding poverty. You should see how the whole community is being destroyed by cheap alcohol which has become their only refuge from poverty."

Arcadia is a district in southern Harare that was designated the district for Coloured people to live during the era of white rule. It has remained a traditional Coloured suburb. The community was considered a buffer between supremacist whites and the black majority, to the extent that they enjoyed more privileges than their black mothers, cousins, aunts and uncles - but fewer opportunities than their white forebears.

"Every civilised country should have a sort of safety net for its poor, regardless of who they are," the Harare journalist told IWPR. "But Robert Mugabe has created a strong anti-white sentiment that is loudly hailed everyday in the public media to the point where, in the end, it seems the only poor people are black."

He said that non-governmental organisations also tended to pander to the myth, continuing, "They think food aid should only be for blacks in rural areas or underprivileged black communities in working class suburbs. But we have a huge crisis in predominantly Coloured areas and areas formerly preserves of the white population."

He argued that in Zimbabwe's current dire situation black people were generally less vulnerable and were marginally better off than their white and Coloured fellow countrymen. "First," he said, "most blacks have two homes, one in the urban areas and the other in the rural areas. The two supplement each other. Hence when hard times hit they can send some family members back home to the countryside, and if hard times hit the rural areas those in the cities will always chip in with various forms of help."

He said the African extended family system remained invaluable for the black population, even in Zimbabwe's unusually disastrous context - unlike the situation in the more individualistic white and Coloured communities. Jim Rose, the white American, must have found the extended family a comfort and solace throughout the years he lived in the black community of Chitungwiza.

The journalist added, "I think non-government organisations should begin focusing on the poor whites and Coloureds. Otherwise if we allow these two groups to perish from hunger and poverty, what would be the difference between that and ethnic cleansing?"

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

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