

Zimbabwe's Farming Disaster

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Derelict properties of first two white farmers murdered in Zimbabwe mirror the country's agricultural collapse.

Near the 66-year-old Nhowe Mission school and hospital more than 100 kilometres southeast of Harare, David Stevens became the first white farmer to die in Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe's controversial and economically disastrous "land reform" programme.

Under Mugabe's reforms, land was forcibly taken from white commercial farmers and redistributed to landless blacks in the hope that they would begin an agricultural and social revolution.

But today David Stevens' Arizona Farm, once one of the country's most successful tobacco-producing operations, is derelict, its buildings collapsing and its fields reduced to a vista of tall weeds and encroaching bush.

Two journalists from one of the country's last independent newspapers, the weekly Zimbabwe Independent, have been investigating what happened to the farms of the first two white farmers to be killed under Mugabe's reforms.

Augustine Mukaro went to Arizona Farm to assess what has happened to it since Stevens was beaten and tied up with wire in a police station on April 15, 2000 by so-called war veterans, a vigilante group personally loyal to Mugabe. Stevens and his black foreman, Julius Andoche, were then taken from the police station by the war vets into the bush where both were shot dead.

Loughy Dube went to Compensation Farm, on the other side of Zimbabwe, some 500 kilometres southwest of Arizona Farm, where, three days after Stevens' murder, the owner, Martin Olds, was battered with iron rods by the vigilantes before being shot dead. As in the Stevens case, police refused to go to Olds' help.

Dube reported that all the infrastructure on Compensation Farm, which was a thriving safari and wild animal conservation operation, is burned out and abandoned. All the animals, including a herd of rare sable antelope and Olds' herd of 1,000 pedigree cattle, have been killed for the pot. Peasant subsistence farmers settled by the government on the land in mud and wattle huts have been unable to produce crops because the government has failed to provide them with irrigation equipment, in a notoriously dry area, or other inputs necessary for minimal agricultural production.

Mukaro's and Dube's discoveries on Arizona and Compensation Farms only mirror what is clear to the naked eye in a country that until the beginning of this century was dubbed the breadbasket of Africa. For hundreds of kilometres, on once prime farms there are no workers in the fields, no stands of ripening maize, no smoke coming from the flues of tobacco barns, and no cattle or sheep getting fat on the grass that still grows tall. Indeed, little sign of life or production at all.

The United Nations recently launched a 215 million US dollar appeal for food aid for Zimbabwe amid grim projections that this season's grain yields - in a country that once exported to its neighbours - will only represent half the nation's annual requirements.

With severe drought exacerbating the crisis, Lovemore Moyo, deputy chairman of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, said, "People in the rural areas are on the brink of starvation. The strongest may survive this - the others won't, as long as ZANU PF [Mugabe's ruling party] uses food as an electioneering tool."

Mugabe and ZANU PF have been widely accused of withholding international food aid from people who do not possess ZANU PF membership cards.

The initial land invaders, mostly war veterans, were themselves pushed from the farms so that they could be redistributed to top ZANU PF party officials, senior army, air force and police officers and compliant judges and journalists. Few of the powerful and privileged "new farmers" are producing crops while the rest lack the skills to produce even on a subsistence level, deputy agriculture minister Sylvester Nguni recently admitted.

Visiting Stevens' Arizona Farm, once recommended by the Commercial Farmers Union as a model to be replicated throughout the country, Mukaro said he found the main working compound burned to the ground and deserted. "Everything looks run down and deserted," said the reporter.

"The dereliction makes any right-minded person question whether the people who abducted and murdered Stevens in 2000 were driven by hunger for land or simply inspired by greed and racial hatred. Over and above all, did they really desire land for farming?"

"People in the area know who killed Stevens, but the police have never questioned the man."

Mukaro said the wasteland that today marks Arizona and all surrounding farms illustrates how the new farmers were "dumped on farmland without the necessary equipment, knowledge or financial backing to prepare them to take over from the fleeing whites.

"The farmers are failing to utilise the land in the same manner as the previous owners. Most said they had no resources such as draught power or fertiliser."

Mukaro met the only current occupant of Arizona Farm, Marian Shangwe, who has taken occupancy of the farmhouse - all windows broken and paint peeling off after seven years of neglect - to sell beer to teachers from Nhowe Mission. "All teachers come to drink from here," said Shangwe. "Nhowe as an institution owned by the [United States-headquartered] Church of Christ does not allow the sale of beer from their premises, so teachers have nowhere else to go."

To date, no one has been arrested or prosecuted for the murder of Olds. The same applies to his 72-year-old mother, Gloria, whose body, riddled with bullets, was discovered on the neighbouring Silver Springs Farm two years after her son's murder.

On Compensation Farm, devoid of wild animals, cattle and crops, Dube spoke to Thulani Mupande, a middle-aged man who was moved on to the farm with his family shortly after Olds was killed.

Mupande said life was difficult because the government had not fulfilled its promises to drill boreholes to

support crops. Mupande said most of the "new settlers" had quit the farm, taking with them engines installed by Olds to pump water for his cattle.

"We are all praying that it rains, but the skies are not opening up," said Mupande. "We are all going to starve again this year if it does not rain. Most people left a long time ago because there is no hospital or clinic around and the only school is twenty kilometres away."

Chris Jarrett, former chairman of the local farmers association, told Dube that most of the people who were moved on to Compensation Farm left after all the wild animals and beef cattle had been killed. "Olds had a thriving safari business," said Jarrett. "There were thousands of sable and impala on the farm but all were hunted by the war veterans when they moved into Compensation. Now there is absolutely nothing.

"The situation is sad. Commercial farmers in Nyamandlovu [the district in which the Olds farm is located] were supplying the whole country with butternuts, tomatoes, beetroot, maize, tobacco, paprika, onions and cabbages. But now all you get from these farmers is a few buckets of maize."

On the other side of the country, Mukaro quoted an agricultural expert as saying, "Nationally, agricultural output has predictably declined, relegating government efforts to a national joke.

"The major constraint to increased productivity is the uncertainty of tenure where farmers are evicted on a daily basis. Continued acquisition notices [confiscating farms by decree], disruptions, acts of violence on farms and lack of land-based collateral are some of the problems farmers face."

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