

## **How we were dispossessed**

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*A former farmer tells the story of the Zimbabwean land seizures*

The story of Zimbabwe's economic collapse begins in 1997, the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1997, a day that is now known as "Black Friday" in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe currency lost 75% of its value against the US\$ in one day. Why? Facing pressure from the war veterans, always crucial to the ruling ZANU-PF's grip on power, the Mugabe Government had earlier in 1997 announced unbudgeted pension payouts that amounted to 3% of National GDP, or in more frightening terms, 55% of the previous year's total budget. This was the first fundamental error leading to Zimbabwe's collapse.

The failing economy from 1997 onwards, led to international isolation in economic terms with, both World Bank and IMF suspending credit lines as they believed Zimbabwe could not afford the debt bill that would be incurred by lending more money to Zimbabwe. Investors saw the economic instability as high-risk and withdrew capital and stopped investing in projects.

From independence in 1980, to 1985, land resettlement was conducted under government's "first option to buy" at market prices, with many farmers selling to leave the country due to distrust in their former enemy, resulting in resettlement on some 3 million hectares. Very little of this land was used for commercial farming by the new tenants, subsistence farming was the order of the day. The government held title on this land, the new owners unable to raise bank loans without title deeds. Eventually the government was no longer able to acquire land, as farmers were no longer leaving or selling.

The 1992 Land Acquisition Act of Zimbabwe provided for forced purchase of farms, as long as the property was unused or underutilized land, owned by absentee landlords, or surrounded by communal areas, AND the owner had multiple farms. The act required fair compensation and provided a right of appeal. Any sale of agricultural land required government consent, in the form a document known as a "Certificate of No Interest", this document indicating the Government did not want to acquire the land. The Commercial Farmers Union (CFU) told farmers that this would protect them in the future. In November of 1997, the Mugabe government listed 1471 white owned farms for compulsory acquisition, including many farms that had been purchased under the "Certificate of No Interest" issued by the State. In a country with only 4500 commercial farmers, and around 5300 commercial farms, this was a large portion of the agricultural sector of the country. CFU were advised by State Officials that this

would be a one-time exercise. This was simply a fop served to allay the fears of the remaining farmers.

Between the unbudgeted pension payouts and the gazetted land acquisition plans, foreign capital took flight and within months, the Zimbabwe Reserve bank had run out of foreign capital reserves. After trying to raise taxes to fund the programmes, the price of sadza (Maize Meal), a staple food, went up and food riots followed in the capital city of Harare. 841 farmers resisted to attempts to grab their farms via the Courts, the other 630 farms were acquired by the State at market rate and immediately put under subsistence farming, again due to a lack of collateral value and commercial farming skills amongst the new tenants.

In February of 2000, the newly formed MDC, openly supported by white farmers resisting acquisition, defeated the Government in Referendum on Constitutional Amendments, one of which was to allow the Government to seize farms without compensation for the land, improvements were to be compensated at State determined rates. The turnout for the referendum was 26%, the government had never faced opposition before, and believed they would win comfortably. They lost 54% to 46%. ZANU-PF panicked, as June 2000, just 4 months away, was the deadline for General Elections.

Within weeks, war veterans started invading white owned farms in small numbers across the country. The High Court ruled the land invasions to be illegal. The police refused to intervene in most cases, as they declared the matter was "political", not criminal. Most farmers fled once their farms were invaded, those who resisted were killed, 12 in total. 78 black farm managers were killed during this period as well. The first farmer killed, just before Easter 2000, in the town of Macheke, 140km East of Harare, was David Stevens also an MDC activist, kidnapped, tortured and shot dead by a mob, whilst police looked on. The war veterans drank his blood after killing him.

On April 18<sup>th</sup> 2000, Martin Olds refused to surrender his farm and was shot dead near Nyamandlovu, 25 km outside Bulawayo. Just under a year later, in March 2001, his 72yr old mother Gloria was shot 15 times and killed after she also refused to surrender the farm as well. Within weeks her farm was taken by invaders. Martin Olds was not politically affiliated, he was murdered by a mob of 40 men armed with new AK47's, as police, less than 10 minutes away, failed to intervene, turned away an ambulance trying to get through to him, after his VHF radio calls indicated he had been wounded. He fought bravely for 3 hours, until his house was petrol bombed and the heat drove him outside where he was beaten senseless and shot twice in the face. Farmers who wanted to assist him, turned back after coming under fire.

Martin Olds was murdered the day after Mugabe said on National Television of whites "Our present state of mind is that you are now our enemies because you really have behaved as enemies of Zimbabwe. We are full of anger." Not one

person was ever charged with the killing of a white farmer or a black farm manager. A white farmer's brother, Blondie Bezuidenhout, who ran over and killed 2 invaders who tried to block his way off the family farm, was jailed for 12 years for culpable homicide. He served 8 years in prison.

A neighbouring farmer, was quoted as saying "The Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) is telling us that we must not resist or there will be a bloodbath. But as far as I am concerned, as a third generation Zimbabwean, I can't just stand there if someone comes to my farm with guns. We have been told the police will not help. Now we are going to start defending ourselves."

Divided they fell, one by one, as they never stood united.

The unity amongst farmers experienced in the 70's during the war against ZIPRA and ZANLA terrorists no longer existed. It should also be noted that no CPF or Commando systems existed in Zimbabwe. The South African government's scrapping of the Commando system in 2003 was a deliberate act designed to weaken farmer security, and it was passed with the lie being told that a special police unit would be established to handle this. This news was received in Zimbabwe, now 2 years into land invasions, with disbelief, and the wide spread view, that the South African government was planning the same course of action with its own white farmers.

Prior to the February 2000 Referendum, the Government had negotiated and consulted the CFU, and the CFU had always advised farmers to adopt a conciliatory role in any dealings regarding their lands. After the lost referendum the government basically ignored the CFU, humouring them with meaningless meetings, whilst encouraging illegal land invasions by armed mobs. Having fed the crocodile for many years, the CFU members were now being eaten by the same crocodile.

It must be noted that as a result of CFU's assurances in the late 90's, no contingency planning was ever undertaken. CFU's insisted on accepting the governments word in good faith, and then relying purely on the legal system to try protect farmers, this left farmers totally defenceless when the land invasions began in 2000.

Farmers failed to stand as a unit in areas when a farm was invaded, most adopted a "I do not want to upset the government" attitude per the CFU instructions, while their neighbours were chased away. Eventually their docility cost them all, leaving less than 250 farmers on the lands, out of the original 4500.

Mugabe's ZANU-PF "won" the June 2000 elections with a 2/3rds majority and amended the Zimbabwe Constitution to allow for seizure of land without compensation, but still with compensation for improvements, despite these amendments having been defeated 6 months earlier in the lost Referendum.

The amendments did NOT permit Court appeals against procedurally correct expropriation. Very few farmers ever received compensation for improvements (less than 50) and those that did, tell that the value was heavily understated by Government officials doing inspections.

Local Land Affairs offices were established and corruption ruled the day. Farmers who won Court Orders to have their lands returned due to failures to follow procedures, found the police would not enforce the Court Orders. Further orders from the Courts to force the police to carry out the earlier Court Orders were also ignored. Judges who ruled in favour of farmers were quickly forced to retire, usually by death threats, and replaced with ZANU-PF judges who were quickly granted seized farms for their own use. The newly loaded Benches gave appealing farmers a hostile reception.

I helped a family member leave the last portion of his farm in 2012, after he was assured many times in the years before that, by Land Affairs officials it would be left alone, if he ceded other parts of his farm to rich ZANU aligned businessmen, and high ranking government officials. Sadly, that entire farm now lies in ruin, along with over 4000 other farms seized over the last 18 years, only 250 white farmers remain, also under constant threat of being kicked off the land. Dairy Farmers have largely been left intact, importing fresh milk is expensive, and a shortage of that product will remove bread from the population, again an extremely unpopular move. Also still left on their farms are farmers who have openly supported ZANU-PF.

Bilateral Investment Protection Agreements (BIPA's) with foreign governments have been ignored as their citizens lost farms with no recourse to any justice. This has alienated many foreign countries who no longer provide any aid to Zimbabwe. A SADC Tribunal ruling that the entire process was racist and illegal, and in violation of SADC's own agreements and treaties resulted in South Africa leading the charge to have the SADC Tribunal disbanded, possibly in anticipation of their own plans when they felt threatened enough.

For every white farmer kicked off the farms, along went 100 workers and family members. These workers and dependants (around 500 000 in total) were never considered for land from the government land reform process, as they were seen to be supporters of the farmers and MDC opposition party. Most of these folks had never lived anywhere else and were now suddenly homeless.

The original farmers still hold the only title deeds to the farms they lost, banks do not finance the new tenants, and the ruling party regularly evict tenants who are seen to be disloyal, a constant threat at every election. Nobody has security of tenure on any of the occupied farms. Numerous attempts by the State to provide seed, fertilisers, tractors, ploughs and such items to new farmers have all failed. Party officials steal much of the inputs and sell them to operational farmers, or

the end users sell them for cash to live as they cannot wait in hunger for crops to grow.

State media reports every year, of upcoming bumper harvests, yet food imports are still higher than ever before, and tobacco exports are still not at the levels they were during the late 1990's. In an effort to try control food prices, the Government decided that all maize and wheat MUST be sold to the Grain Marketing Board, a State controlled entity. Farmers struggle to get paid, and often find the officials quoting false figures on moisture content and tonnage, to reduce payment amounts. As a result many farmers now farm tobacco, which is sold off private auction floors, and payments are much quicker.

What is also not often factored into the impact of the loss of agricultural production and food security, is that allied industries collapsed. Engineering firms, fertiliser manufacturers, pesticide producers, food processing plants, implement and equipment manufacturers, fuel suppliers, all collapsed. Hundreds of thousands more black Zimbabweans were rendered unemployed.

Millions had already fled, mainly to South Africa, and those that remain struggle to survive from day to day.

The collapse of the tax base saw State Revenues decline dramatically, to such a point that in 2007, with elections only a year away, the Reserve Bank started printing money, increasing the M0 and M1 money levels with no underlying reserves or support base. Foreign currency was briskly traded on the streets, with the local currency depreciating against all currencies at inflationary rates of 1000's of percent per month. Over the years, we had numerous zeros removed from bank notes and prices. A Z\$5 000 000 note was overnight declared a Z\$50 note, because cash register systems could not deal with all the zeroes, this occurred at least 3 times. For many years now, Government Bonds are merely rolled over at redemption time, as no funds exist to payout the bond bearers.

Within months of being forced in a Government of National Unity by SADC leaders, after an election 2008, Mugabe admitted in 2015, on national television that he had lost resoundingly, the Zimbabwe Dollar was scrapped. Zimbabwe now used the US\$ and Rand as primary currencies, also accepting the Botswana Pula, British Pound and Australian Dollar as legal tender. The Zimbabwe Dollars's highest face value note at the time was 100 Trillion Dollars, and it could no longer buy a loaf of bread or a pint of beer. Pensions and life savings were reduced to zero. Unemployment in Zimbabwe currently stands at 85-88%, trade unions claim as high as 92%. The largest single employer in Zimbabwe is the Government, although public health care and public education have all but collapsed. The only investments that survived the hyper inflationary period was property investments, and gold, illegal but widely available.

No rational thinking person has any doubt that what transpired in March and April 2000 was a desperate attempt by ZANU-PF to buy votes after its defeat in the Referendum, and once they opened that Pandora's box, they could not close it, for risking alienating those who had not yet fed from the trough of free land. Mugabe once stated that only white farmers with multiple farms would be targeted, however he quickly realised the lie in his own propaganda: not that many farmers had multiple farms.

It has since come to light that many Cabinet Ministers accumulated multiple farms, and traded other farm allocations for cash and favours, Mugabe and his family claimed 12 farms (known to the public), military and police top-dogs, were also awarded numerous farms. In 95% of the cases, the farms were simply looted of whatever assets (tractors, harvesters, ploughs, generators), fuel , fertiliser could be found, tin shed roofs stripped to build huts, fences sold as scrap wire or used as snares to trap game on seized game farms.

Farmers were not permitted to remove anything but household contents and personal effects when evicted from farms. Another tactic that was very widespread, was to invade farms just before harvest time, then crops would be stolen and sold at the various auctions or to the GMB. No production would take place on seized lands after that.

So continues a sad story that started as a bread basket for the region, and ended as a begging bowl within the region, all because a liberation movement ran out of ways to keep its voters happy, and decided to strip a minority of what they had, and spread it across an ever increasing support base, in a vote buying exercise. And once the farms were finished, they started with white owned businesses, and all mining companies. The crocodile cannot be satisfied.

To quote a now exiled farmer, "We tried to appease them by giving what they wanted. When they wanted it all, we had two choices, die defending our lands, or move on and try to survive somewhere else. The world turned its eyes away from us, as they did in the 1980's when Mugabe butchered 20 000 Ndebeles in Matabeleland. We stood alone, and fell alone, most of us simply packed up and left."

*The author is a former Zimbabwean farmer who has requested anonymity.*

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