

4. The Lost Decade: The 1990s

In many respects, the 1990s was a lost decade. Major political and economic crises steadily gained steam, land redistribution largely ground to a halt and the Mugabe government increasingly engaged in brinkmanship and demagoguery that kept ZANU-PF in power at a steep cost. The government, donors and landowners all found convenient reasons for not prioritising land redistribution, increasing the likelihood it could be exploited for political purposes. The government adopted an increasingly reactive approach, creating new crises as it sought to fend off threats to power. Amid these tensions, discussions between Harare and London dissolved into long arguments about who bore primary responsibility for addressing Zimbabwe's land inequities.

A. THE 1990 ELECTION, CONSTITUTIONAL REVISIONS AND COMMONWEALTH SUMMIT

In many ways, the 1990 election foreshadowed problems that would arise as Zimbabwe veered dangerously close to becoming a one-party state.⁸⁹ In 1989, a new opposition party, the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) was launched by Edgar Tekere, a former secretary general of the ZANU-PF and long-time associate of Mugabe. ZUM aimed to fill the vacuum left by the absorption of ZAPU into ZANU-PF. Tekere gained notoriety for his role in a farm invasion shortly after independence that resulted in the death of a white farmer. Tekere was found guilty for his role in the death, but charges were dropped by courts under a provision that protected ministers acting to suppress terrorism. Yet, as an opposition leader Tekere maintained support from many conservative whites who despised Mugabe as a radical socialist since the liberation war.

In some regards, the 1990 election was a referendum on the first decade of independence. Zimbabwe had maintained economic growth rates of 3-4 per cent annually, stability had generally returned after the Matabeleland violence and President Mugabe had maintained a solid international reputation. However, many Zimbabweans appeared somewhat

⁸⁹ For a fuller discussion of the 1990 election, see Lloyd Sachikonye, "The 1990 Zimbabwe Elections: A Post-Mortem", *Review of African Political Economy* 17, no. 48 (Summer 1990).

uncomfortable with the notion of a one-party state, and rising prices and credible corruption charges at senior government levels combined to mute the excitement that was prevalent at independence.

With white commercial farmers still holding some 30 per cent of the land, Mugabe again turned to the land issue to generate political support. Advocating a bolder approach to redistribution, he commented before the election, "It makes absolute nonsense of our history as an African country that most of our arable and ranching land is still in the hands of our erstwhile coloniser, while the majority of our peasant community still live like squatters in their god-given land".⁹⁰ Given that the constitution would likely be much easier to amend after 18 April 1990 (when some Lancaster House provisions would expire), the prospect of a more radical approach to land redistribution loomed large.

Mugabe also continued his pattern of managed intimidation, rather than massive voter fraud, to bolster his position at the ballot box. ZUM was prevented from holding rallies in the capital, opposition candidates were consistently harassed and nine candidates withdrew within days of the vote as a result of violent threats. Mugabe targeted civil servants who supported the ZUM, stating "give us their names. We will kick them out".⁹¹ Predictably, ZANU-PF virtually swept the elections, taking 116 of the 120 seats, and Mugabe secured 78 per cent of the vote.⁹² By almost any accounting, ZUM was poorly organised and had uninspiring leadership.⁹³ Former political scientist Jonathan Moyo observed: "The problem is not an opposition party now. ZUM is finished. But the potential opposition is there, because the economic liberalisation program is going to be very painful, and next year 400,000 school-leavers are coming on to the job market with no hope of employment".⁹⁴ Moyo, a steady critic of the government before he became an ardent ZANU-PF defender as Mugabe's information minister, also said, "Mr. Mugabe and his party are not as popular as many observers thought", and "Zimbabweans do not want a one-party state".⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, op. cit., p. 121.

⁹¹ *The Independent* (London), 23 March 1990.

⁹² In the run-up to the election, the government reconfigured the legislature to consist of a 150-member unicameral parliament consisting of 120 elected seats, eight provincial governors, ten chiefs elected by a Council of Chiefs and twelve seats appointed by the president. Given that many of these appointees were Mugabe and ZANU-PF loyalists, the new system made it even more difficult for an opposition to gain a voting majority.

⁹³ In addition to the dismissed murder charge, ZUN leader Edgar Tekere was known for his violent temper and had been repeatedly arrested for drunken driving.

⁹⁴ *The Independent* (London), 16 August 1990.

⁹⁵ *The Guardian* (London), 20 April 1990.

A record low turnout of 54 per cent seemed to indicate an undertow of dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, convinced that the overwhelming result gave him a mandate to move forward with plans to create a one-party state, Mugabe declared that Zimbabwe's future would be "better guaranteed under one single, monolithic and gigantic political party".⁹⁶ Mugabe's pronouncement seemed all the more remarkable given the tide of democratic change sweeping across Central and Eastern Europe at the time. However, Mugabe's plans were scotched by resistance within the ZANU-PF politburo – primarily from former ZAPU party members.

In late July 1990, Minister of Agriculture Witness Mangwende, acknowledging that mistakes had been made throughout the 1980s, unveiled a new plan to resettle 110,000 families on 5 million hectares.⁹⁷ As 54,000 families had already been resettled on 3.3 million hectares, Mangwende in essence was restating the old goal of 162,000 families on roughly nine million hectares. If the figures were familiar, the legislation would make it considerably easier to acquire land (e.g., striking down the provision that land purchases had to be in foreign currency) and move beyond the willing seller, willing buyer formula. With the expiration of the Lancaster House Agreement, these plans would serve as the model for land redistribution in 1991 and 1992.

In the wake of the election, Zimbabwe hosted a meeting of the heads of state of the Commonwealth – the group of some 53 nations, mostly former British colonies. The Harare Declaration issued by the heads of state articulated the organisation's commitment to the principles of democracy, good governance and rule of law. The Commonwealth declared "democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government" as fundamental principles for member states.⁹⁸ President Mugabe warmly welcomed Queen Elizabeth II to the summit and in the closing address declared, "Let the Commonwealth live and live forever".⁹⁹ That phrase would stand in stark relief as his government and the Commonwealth repeatedly clashed over democratic principles during the decade.

⁹⁶ *The Financial Times*, 31 March 1990.

⁹⁷ "New land policy bans ownership by foreigners", BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 7 August 1990.

⁹⁸ See www.thecommonwealth.org/whowcare/declarations/.

⁹⁹ Chan, *Robert Mugabe*, op. cit., p. 68

B. NEW DIRECTIONS; SIMILAR RESULTS

In an effort to make its land policy more sweeping, the government pursued constitutional revisions. Despite diplomatic pressure by the British, the parliament adopted several constitutional amendments in 1990 and 1993 to make compulsory land acquisition easier and release the government from the willing seller, willing buyer formula.¹⁰⁰ The amendments watered down the strict payment provisions in the Lancaster House Agreement. In addition to repealing the requirement to disburse foreign currency for farms compulsorily acquired, parliament only required government payment to be "fair compensation" in a "reasonable time" rather than "adequate compensation, paid promptly". Parliament was given significantly more latitude in determining "fair compensation", and in an unprecedented infringement of the judiciary's independence, a provision was included that "no law shall be called into question by any court on the ground that the compensation provided by the law is not fair".¹⁰¹ Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Enoch Dumbutshena complained that the 1990 amendment went against, "all accepted norms of modern society and the rule of law", particularly questioning the right of parliament to establish land prices.¹⁰² Still, the government would later complain that the acquisition process remained "slow, cumbersome and expensive, largely because of the commercial farmers' resistance".¹⁰³

Following the amendments, a New National Land Policy was formulated in 1991 that recognised the economic role of the large-scale commercial farming sector and acknowledged the growing population and land pressures in the communal areas.¹⁰⁴ The government promised that changes, including greater emphasis on economic returns, would be instituted in the land reform program. It proposed to redistribute more land to "capable farmers", rather than merely redistribute it to the landless poor. The land for "capable farmers" would largely be drawn from existing white commercial farms, which would be cut roughly in half, from 11.5 million (approximately one-third of the entire country) to 5 million hectares. Resettlements were planned to increase from 3.3 to 8.3 million hectares. The government promised a land tax to discourage speculative holdings and a commission to examine land tenure issues. It also made

¹⁰⁰ Constitutional Amendment no. 11, 1990; Constitutional Amendment no. 12, 1993.

¹⁰¹ Section 6 of Act 30 of 1990.

¹⁰² *The Guardian* (London), 13 December 1990.

¹⁰³ Utete report, op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ A coherent statement of the New National Land Policy is contained in a paper by Ngoni Masoka (1991) that draws on the policy address delivered by Agriculture Minister Witness Mangwende at an emergency meeting of the Commercial Farmers' Union in the Harare Sheraton, 11 January 1991.

statements about reducing foreign and absentee land ownership and limiting the size of farms and the number that an individual or company could own. To ease planning and implementation, the government said it would designate several farms at a time for acquisition and resettlement.

The 1985 Land Acquisition Act was also redrafted in 1992 and set out new conditions and procedures. The legislation was pushed through parliament in less than three weeks. Under considerable international pressure, partly at the behest of white commercial farmers, the government deleted a provision that would have restricted the court from overturning government financial assessments of confiscated farms. Together with the constitutional amendments, the revised act explicitly authorised compulsory acquisition of rural land that was in full use, not merely underutilised. Land owners could not sell or make permanent improvements without written notice from the government.¹⁰⁵ Rather than requiring a one-time payment, compensation could be paid in stages, over five years, significantly reducing the actual value realised by sellers.¹⁰⁶ The revised act's complicated clauses were often challenged in court by the Commercial Farmers' Union.

Despite possessing greater legal latitude, formidable social and economic problems limited the government's actual capacity to implement its new strategy. Under the World Bank Economic Structural Adjustment Program instituted in 1991, which pressed the government to reduce spending and expensive subsidies, liberalise the foreign exchange system and eliminate its monopoly on the sale of agricultural commodities, the government had difficulty raising funds for land reform. The abolition of subsidies and controls significantly benefited rural producers, but urban consumers felt the effects acutely: the price of maize meal nearly tripled between 1990 and 1993; the price of bread shot up 250 per cent from 1992 to 1993; and delivering a baby in a hospital, once free, now cost \$75.¹⁰⁷ The structural adjustment program led to higher interest rates but, due to the government's reluctance to reduce the fiscal deficit, did not lower inflation, which hit 30 per cent by 1991. To compound problems, a devastating drought struck all of southern Africa in 1992. The government badly mishandled the first signs of the drought, and food stocks were perilously low. It also manipulated the distribution of food aid, giving clear preference to ZANU-PF supporters – a ploy that would be used repeatedly during political crises over the next decade. Although widespread starvation was

¹⁰⁵ The government had a one-year window to acquire land before the notice would need to be renewed.

¹⁰⁶ The slower timetable for compensation became increasingly problematic as inflation began to skyrocket from late 1997 onward.

¹⁰⁷ *The Economist*, 2 October 1993.

avoided, the cynical use of hunger as a political tool signalled trouble to come.

There are also suggestions that the government's rhetorical focus on radical land redistribution during this period reflected a desire to blame white farmers for the growing food crisis. Commercial farmers pointed to the drought and slump in overall food production to suggest the dangers of a poorly planned redistribution effort. White commercial farmers again raised concerns about government land redistribution plans that were accompanied by limited planning. It was relatively easy to assail the credibility of the plans given that there were few companion efforts to extend the support services vital to making relocated farmers successful.

While stakeholders continued to debate land policies, land redistribution was not keeping up with the continued brisk population growth. The first post-independence census in 1982 showed that Zimbabwe's population had ballooned to more than 7.6 million.¹⁰⁸ Population density had increased by nearly 50 per cent since 1969. In some areas, like Mashonaland East, the change was more than 70 per cent.¹⁰⁹ By 1992, the population was more than 10.4 million, with over 50 per cent living within the communal areas, indicating a clear need to boost economic productivity to support a rapidly growing population.

Land reform efforts in the early 1990s replicated those of the early 1980s: despite thundering rhetoric, the government did very little. The 1991 New National Land Policy spurred creation of a presidential commission, under the chairmanship of Professor Mandivamba Rukuni, to conduct a thorough review.¹¹⁰ Acceptance of its recommendations, including secure and legal land tenure for communal farmers, the subdivision of large farms and an appropriate system of land taxation might have improved policy in both resettlement and communal areas, yet most were ignored. Ironically, like the colonial courts, the cabinet ruled that the state should retain ownership of Communal Land. Communities that had used and occupied the land for centuries would only have access with government approval. While the cabinet urged that procedures for the subdivision and sale of commercial farms be streamlined, it kept the centralised land subdivision committee in place. Overall, the cabinet response to the Commission's findings was slow and incomplete; the

¹⁰⁸ 1982 Provincial Population Data Sheets, cited in the 1992 census.

¹⁰⁹ *1982 Population Census: A Preliminary Assessment* (Harare: Central Statistical Office, 1984).

¹¹⁰ Mandivamba Rukuni, et al., *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Appropriate Agricultural Land Tenure Systems* (also known as the Rukuni report), 3 volumes, October 1994.

government rejected any recommendations viewed as a threat to its broad powers over land and natural resource allocation.

With the population booming, economy deteriorating (official unemployment rates had reached 50 per cent) and structural adjustment reforms unpopular, the Mugabe government began to face public protest. Economists Patrick Bond and Masimba Manyanya contend that in the early 1990s, "the legitimacy of the government was fading fast, as regular corruption scandals and growing hardship for urban residents began to breed discontent".¹¹¹ As it cut services, the government alienated labour unions it had pressured to keep wages down, while students at the University of Zimbabwe took to the streets to protest plans to take over the school's administration. But as consumers, students and labourers suffered, white farmers continued to do well, with large scale commercial farmers benefiting from policy reforms aimed to promote agricultural exports.

Pressure on the government budget was also growing from other quarters: for example, the Zimbabwe Liberation War Veterans' Association lobbied for its members' war service to be compensated. Following negotiations, several laws were passed in their favour, including the 1993 War Victims Compensation Act, which promised access to land. While it received relatively modest attention at the time, this act played a central role in triggering the economic and political crisis of the late 1990s.

C. LAND FOR THE ELITE?

In April 1993, the government published a list of 70 farms it intended to seize with its expanded land acquisition powers. However, controversy dogged the plan. The farm of Ndabaningi Sithole, a black Zimbabwean opposition politician, was included on the list, immediately sparking speculation that politics played a more powerful role than social equity. There were also legal challenges. A significant proportion of the 70 farms tagged for seizure would later be delisted after court appeals. In May 1994, the Zimbabwean *Daily Gazette* ran an expose revealing some of the new beneficiaries of redistribution. The paper disclosed that land had been redistributed to senior government officials, including ministers, military officers, cabinet secretary Charles Utete and former Agriculture Minister Witness Mangwende. In almost all cases, properties were received at well below market value. Sensing a political firestorm, President Mugabe quickly sought to distance himself and called for leases to be cancelled as of October 1994. After initial public anger subsided, however, senior ZANU-PF officials continued to receive considerable tracts of land.

¹¹¹ Bond and Manyanya, *Zimbabwe's Plunge*, op. cit., p. 87.

Whether land redistribution should be tilted toward small farmers or toward creating a new class of more successful black commercial farmers has always been a key focus of debate. Some argued for providing large numbers of poor people with small parcels, while others preferred redistributing larger parcels to black commercial farmers. All agreed, however, that commercial farmers should pay commercial rates to lease the land. Yet, this never happened – many farmers never paid the leases or, since the leases were never adjusted for inflation, paid derisively low rates. The secretive manner in which leases were allocated and the lack of a transparent system to advertise the availability of farms led to concerns about the process as a whole. The prominence of government officials and army officers on the list of those gaining access to leased farms prompted frequent accusations of cronyism, replicating those levelled against the former colonial authorities. Critics claimed that the program was becoming a land grab to benefit elites.

Budget scarcities heightened tensions between the agencies responsible for the land program. Resettlement rates were falling short of the revised targets established in the early 1990s. The 1991 New National Land Policy had changed targets again, to 220,000 households on 5 million hectares, but the government only settled some 20,000 families on 0.3 million hectares acquired from commercial farmers. It became increasingly clear that without donor funds for land acquisition and settlement, the program could not proceed. Apart from the basic costs of the actual land purchase, it was expensive to resettle small farmers from the communal areas on former commercial farms. Housing, water, seed, fertiliser and basic infrastructure such as roads, buildings, drainage, irrigation systems and land clearance accounted for more than half the total costs of land redistribution and resettlement. At the same time, the pattern of giving land to political, military and economic insiders raised sharp questions among donors about the program.

ZANU-PF maintained overwhelming dominance over public office after sweeping the parliamentary elections in 1995 and the presidential election in 1996.¹¹² Again, ZANU-PF tilted the playing field in its favour despite facing a relatively weak opposition, which was denied public financing and harassed. Opposition parties remained ineffective as they were plagued by weak leadership, poor organisation and a lack of cohesion. In an attempt to draw international attention to governmental interference and manipulation, the two main opposition presidential candidates – Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Ndabaningi Sithole – boycotted the election.

¹¹² The parliamentary and presidential elections had been separated by constitutional amendment. ZANU-PF took 117 of 120 seats in the parliamentary elections, but with only just over 29 per cent voter participation.

Seeking political mileage from the land issue in the 1996 campaign, President Mugabe linked the lack of British funding for land redistribution to threats to seize the land of white commercial farmers without compensation. Even though Mugabe won another six-year term with over 90 per cent of the vote, turnout was only 32 per cent, and domestic and international critics expressed concerns he was becoming a president for life. While he was quick to blame the impact of structural adjustment for Zimbabwe's ills, Mugabe's budget priorities were open to question. At a time when the HIV/AIDS crisis was growing severe, the government slashed the health ministry's funds by more than 20 per cent but increased cabinet salaries and the military budget. *The New York Times* observed:

Zimbabwe is at a crossroads. It could go the way of South Africa – an immensely popular president heading a multi-party democracy with room for dissent and a free press, overseeing an economy in which private enterprise is largely free to produce profits and jobs. Or it could go the way of Kenya – a once robust country with an unrestrained president who has dissidents whipped or threatened, controls the press and lets corruption siphon off so much state money that very little works as well as it used to.¹¹³

In a 1996 interview, President Mugabe insisted, "I would hate myself if I discovered my people regarded me as an oppressor or autocratic. The system we have allows as much freedom for an individual as possible. We do not just tolerate the whites, we accept them".¹¹⁴ However, the 80,000 whites left in the country would increasingly become the focus of intense political rhetoric as a growing economic storm gathered around the president.

D. RISING TENSION BETWEEN LONDON AND HARARE

The 1990s were marked by steadily rising mistrust between the UK and Zimbabwe, with land redistribution a predominant source of this friction. As far as the UK was concerned, land policy and resettlement were pushed to the sidelines between 1989 and 1995 because of Zimbabwe's failure to respond formally to concerns expressed in the 1989 review of the phase-one program. Britain re-engaged on land redistribution funding in March 1996 when Kenneth Clarke, Chancellor of the Exchequer in John Major's administration, stopped in Harare on his way home from a trade

¹¹³ Donald McNeil, "Zimbabwe's Leaders Scoff at Critics of Iron Rule", *The New York Times*, 27 April 1996.

¹¹⁴ *Financial Times* (London), 24 October 1996.

mission in South Africa. He met with President Mugabe, who prodded the British to fulfil their commitment to support land redistribution.¹¹⁵ The British delegation reacted strongly to Mugabe's earlier comments suggesting that farms could be seized without adequate and prompt compensation. Clarke warned that this would have serious consequences and strongly deter foreign investment.

In June 1996, the Minister for Overseas Development, Baroness Lynda Chalker, visited Harare for follow-up discussions with Minister of Lands and Water Kumbirai Kangai. The British Development Division in Harare used the meeting to revisit discussions on options for releasing \$5.4 million of funds and planning for a second phase of resettlements. The British emphasis on land redistribution as a means to alleviate poverty ran sharply counter to Zimbabwe's putative effort to create a new class of black commercial farmers and its increasing allocation of large commercial farms to wealthy blacks.

In a September 1996 policy paper on land redistribution and resettlement, Zimbabwe moved to clarify its policy framework – particularly its commitment to land redistribution for the poor – but this did little to reconcile British and Zimbabwean policy differences. The Zimbabwean government, now with far more sweeping powers to acquire land, hoped that the British would fund land purchases, even for compulsory acquisitions. The British remained wedded to the willing seller, willing buyer principle. Their resistance stemmed not only from aversion to compulsory acquisitions, but also from reluctance to be responsible for compensating white farmers. As one senior British diplomat explains, "It would be seen as Britain being directly responsible for white Zimbabweans; we are not".¹¹⁶ Rather the British, like the World Bank, remained firmly committed to the idea of a market-based approach to land reform.¹¹⁷

In an attempt to overcome the impasse in September 1996, the British government fielded an appraisal mission to develop proposals for a new phase of the UK-supported land resettlement program. The assessment's primary objective was to lay the groundwork for a round table conference

¹¹⁵ *The Herald*, 22 March 1996.

¹¹⁶ ICG interview, Harare, 9 December 2003.

¹¹⁷ There has been a lack of alternatives to World Bank land policy for countries in the region. Many bilateral donors lack technical expertise in the area, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, which has a mandate within UN to handle land and agrarian reform, has so far not played a role in the land question in Southern Africa. A more critical examination by donors of World Bank policies could well produce better policy over the long run.

on land resettlement.¹¹⁸ The proposed conference was designed to expedite debate on land policy and obtain support from a wider circle of donors, which would also help ease political and financial pressures on London. In its final document, the field mission outlined the essential elements of a decentralised resettlement project aimed to benefit the rural poor. It would involve 25,000-35,000 households and cost \$150-\$230 million, or \$5,000-\$6,000 per settler household. On compulsory purchases, the document observed that the international community would be unwilling to bankroll land seizures, "Donors are most unlikely to fund the compulsory purchase of land, for example that arising out of designation".¹¹⁹ The report made no firm offer of funding and indicated that financial considerations would need to be negotiated between the UK and other donors at the proposed conference, which, it suggested, would be followed by a six to twelve-month period to finalise technical considerations for a five-year implementation program.

As the British assessment was being prepared, Zimbabwe's capacity to implement land reform continued to be hampered by bureaucratic constraints and infighting. At one stage, nineteen departments and agencies were involved in the resettlement program. There was also a debilitating rivalry between the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, responsible for land acquisition, and the Ministry of Local Government, responsible for settler selection, infrastructure development and support. The conflicts within the government were also apparent in discussions with the UK and helped fuel London's growing reluctance to fund another phase of land resettlement.

Despite internal disputes, however, Zimbabwean authorities responded to the British planning overtures promptly and positively in December 1996. Mugabe's government agreed the British report provided a basis for further negotiations and accepted the notion of a donors conference. However, Zimbabwe was concerned the British might use the conference as a tactic to delay and pass their "responsibility" to others. While accepting the concept of a preparatory phase, officials insisted that full implementation and financial assistance for land reform should be resumed by July 1997. Bilateral negotiations continued in the first four months of 1997, and British aid officials held detailed discussions with interested donors. There was uniform scepticism regarding the capacity of Zimbabwean ministries

¹¹⁸ ODA Land Appraisal Mission to Zimbabwe, *Agreed Terms of Reference for British Appraisal Mission for Further Assistance to Land Settlement Program in Zimbabwe*, October 1996, Annex 1.

¹¹⁹ Since no donor other than Britain had previously funded land purchase, this diplomatic reference to "donors" not funding land acquisition was a reminder that the position of the British government had not changed since the Lancaster House negotiations in 1979.

to deliver a substantial resettlement program. It was also clear that land settlement could not be funded outside the government budget at a time when Zimbabwe had serious difficulties with the IMF over its deficit.

In May 1997, just prior to the July deadline Zimbabwe issued for Britain to resume funding land reform, UK elections resulted in a Labour majority and the subsequent appointment of Clare Short as secretary for international development. Relations would prove less cordial under Labour than the Conservatives. In November 1997, in response to a Mugabe remark that Britain would have to "look after" the white farmers, Short wrote Minister of Agriculture and Land Kumbirai Kangai:

I should make it clear that we do not accept that Britain has a special responsibility to meet the costs of land purchase in Zimbabwe. We are a new government from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers. We do however recognise the very real issues you face over land reform. We believe that land reform could be an important component of a Zimbabwean program designed to eliminate poverty. We would be prepared to support a program of land reform that was part of a poverty eradication strategy but not on any other basis.¹²⁰

Short's comments, particularly the "colonised not colonisers" remark, triggered a stormy reaction in Zimbabwe. The 2003 Utete report, commissioned by the Mugabe government to review the land program, references Short's comments to support its claims that "The Labour government refused to advance the process of land reform, in effect revoking Britain's obligations as per the Lancaster House understanding".¹²¹ British High Commissioner in Zimbabwe Brian Donnelly insisted the new government did not represent a sea change in policy. He also maintained that the principal new element introduced by Labour was to emphasise partnership with Zimbabwe, on the basis of sovereign equality, rather than a historical relationship rooted in colonialism.¹²² Nevertheless, the exchange increased tensions, which were further exacerbated by Zimbabwe's November 1997 notice that it would compulsorily acquire 1,471 farms, amounting to close to 4 million hectares.¹²³

¹²⁰ This letter appears in an appendix of the Utete report, *op. cit.*

¹²¹ Utete report, *op. cit.*

¹²² Donnelly, "Land Reform: Not If But How?", *op. cit.*

¹²³ Of these 1,471 farms, only 109 were acquired; many were offered for sale voluntarily. Most were de-listed after appeal or legal challenge with support from the Commercial Farmers' Union.

No British funds were made available to the government for land reform between 1990 and 1999, and both the British and Zimbabwean governments suffered from a lack of direction on the issue. Assessing responsibility for the breakdown between London and Harare over the land issue is one of the most divisive debates surrounding Zimbabwe's downward slide. Consider the divergent remarks of two white commercial farmers in Zimbabwe: "Blair washed his hands of land reform. There was absolute commitment in terms of Lancaster House and this was a historical commitment....You can't wash your hands of a historic culpability".¹²⁴ Another insists that the British first soured on supporting land redistribution after the visit by Baroness Chalker, who discovered that the situation was "absolutely about politics. The British are convenient scapegoats".¹²⁵

Clearly, both sides deserve a share of the blame. As a senior British diplomat observed, "The donor community underestimated some of the politics going on at the time, and perhaps missed the bigger picture, the forest for the trees...in light of the large amounts of humanitarian aid Zimbabwe now receives, it certainly would have been less expensive in the long run to put the money on the table and get on with it".¹²⁶ During the earliest phases of land reform in the 1980s, a less cumbersome British funding mechanism could have allowed far larger amounts of land to be redistributed equitably at a time when the Zimbabwean government seemed more committed. The actual sums spent by London remain remarkably low given the benefit the British Empire gleaned from the fertile land of Rhodesia. Further, Clare Short's often bellicose language seems to have miscalculated the land issue's political volatility in Zimbabwe and the lengths to which Mugabe would go to use it for his survival.

While the British certainly made missteps and influenced the EU and the international community to do likewise, the fundamental blame for deterioration of relations must still be placed on the Mugabe government, which vacillated between ignoring the land issue and using it solely for narrow partisan advantage. Worse still, the pattern of redistributing valuable land to ZANU-PF insiders was indicative of a government that increasingly strayed far from the principles of liberation and black empowerment which it rode into power. Admittedly, the government faced periods of drought and difficult economic conditions, which were at times exacerbated by dubious advice from international financial institutions; but Zimbabwe's funding priorities made clear that its interest in land was to bolster a powerful patronage system that ensured the loyalty of senior political and military officials. As London and Harare bickered back and

¹²⁴ ICG interview, Harare, 3 December 2003.

¹²⁵ ICG interview, 5 December 2003.

¹²⁶ ICG interview, 9 December 2003.

forth over funding for land redistribution, a cascading economic crisis was about to unfold.

E. BLACK FRIDAY

It was the lobbying power of Zimbabwe's war veterans that triggered the next domestic crisis. With the 1993 War Veterans Compensation Act, the government had agreed to provide a package of benefits to those who had suffered serious physical or mental injury during the liberation war of the 1970s. However, the administration of the compensation fund was deeply corrupt, and the veterans became increasingly critical of the ZANU-PF leadership. Disbursements were suspended in 1997 amid indications that the money had been almost completely looted by senior party officials, many of whom had not fought in the liberation struggle but claimed large payouts while veterans in real need were neglected.

This provoked a sharp dispute between the government and the War Veterans' Association, even though the latter's protests were spearheaded by Chenjerai Hunzvi, who directed many of the fraudulent payments himself. Hunzvi gave himself the nom de guerre "Hitler" for his alleged fearsome prowess on the liberation battlefield, although it appears he spent a large part of the independence struggle studying in Europe and saw little or no combat. Fond of fiery rhetoric, Hunzvi was more than willing to grandstand on the issue, and in July 1997 the veterans protested in the streets of Harare, leading the government briefly to ban public rallies. On 11 August 1997, President Mugabe was deeply embarrassed when war veterans disrupted his nationally televised speech on Heroes Day, a national holiday marking the liberation war.¹²⁷ Veterans subsequently vandalised ZANU-PF headquarters, and Mugabe quickly realised that he was uniquely vulnerable to the war veterans, whose liberation credentials were impeccable and whose anger over corruption and economic malaise resonated with the broader public.

In August 1997, a commission of inquiry headed by the chief justice of the Supreme Court was appointed to investigate abuses in the payment system. The War Veterans' Association was divided over the investigation.¹²⁸ The veterans forced a meeting on 21 August with Mugabe to insist that if they did not receive land and other compensation by July 1998, they would begin to seize white commercial farms. Mugabe appeared to accede to the

¹²⁷ Richard Cornwell, "Zimbabwe: Mugabe's Choice", *African Security Review* 7, no. 2 (1998).

¹²⁸ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Administration of the War Victims Compensation Act*, Chairperson Mr. Justice Godfrey Gwa Chidyaisiku, Judge President, May 1998, Chapter 11.16.

demands and, at a ZANU-PF summit in September 1997, announced a package for veterans that included a one-time payment of \$4,100 to each individual and a \$163 monthly life pension. While it was not clear how the state would pay for this commitment, particularly as the IMF and the World Bank were expressing concern at the government's failure to rein in public spending, the pledge gave many war veterans a clear stake in continued ZANU-PF rule.¹²⁹ Mugabe's effort to buy off the war veterans would have dire economic consequences.

In October 1997, Mugabe and Tony Blair met at the Commonwealth summit in Edinburgh. Mugabe was eager for the British to provide \$250 million for land acquisition, but his request was largely given the cold shoulder. The British wanted to see a program that not only benefited the poor but also made broad economic sense, and they believed the Zimbabwean program failed these tests.

In mid-October, President Mugabe told the agriculture minister to identify and list some additional 1,500 commercial farms for rapid acquisition. He also made clear that he expected the British to pay, stating "We are going to take the land and we are not going to pay for the soil. This is our set policy. Our land was never bought and there is no way we could buy back the land. However, if Britain wants compensation, they should give us money and we will pass it on to their children".¹³⁰ The general chaos was further fuelled by Chenjerai Hunzvi's 10 November court appearance during an inquiry into whether he had embezzled funds from the war veterans' fund. Several hundred war veterans disrupted the court, marking the beginning of a steady onslaught on the independent judiciary.

Economic pressures on the government were mounting: a crushing load of foreign and domestic debt; investor concerns about threats to seize half the country's commercial farms; slumping commodity prices; the aggressive posture of the war veterans; a public increasingly fed up with rising prices and corruption; fraying relations with the UK; and general alarm among international financial institutions.¹³¹ Mugabe's unbudgeted payments to the war veterans finally broke the economy. Black Friday occurred on 14 November 1997. In the course of a single trading day, the national currency lost more than half its value. The chief economist at the finance ministry observed, "That currency crash was so severe – quite possibly, outside of wartime, the worst ever experienced in such a short

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Fast Track Land Reform in Zimbabwe", *HRW Report* 14, no. 1(A), March 2002.

¹³⁰ *The Guardian* (London), 15 October 1997.

¹³¹ Prices for tobacco, gold, lithium and cotton all slumped badly in the late 1990s.

time in modern history".¹³² Zimbabwe was caught in a perfect storm of eroding economic conditions and bad decision-making. The central bank was compelled to make a wholesale intervention, and corporate foreign currency account holders were required to sell their hard currency for Zimbabwean dollars in an effort to stabilise the currency.

In an increasingly desperate scramble to pay the war veterans, President Mugabe sought to push major tax increases through parliament. Despite controlling 147 of 150 seats, the government could not get its entire package approved. The income and sales tax hikes were rejected on 27 November. The following day, a list of more than 1,500 commercial farms to be targeted for compulsory acquisition was released, further upsetting investor confidence.

As the economic crisis worsened, political resistance increased. On 9 December 1997, amid growing dissatisfaction with escalating food costs and unemployment, the Zimbabwe Confederation of Trade Unions (ZCTU), chaired by General Secretary Morgan Tsvangirai, led a general strike against the proposed tax increases. The widely supported strike provoked a violent reaction. On 11 December, Tsvangirai was badly beaten in his office, an attack widely perceived to have been directed by Mugabe. Tsvangirai complained, "It is a military government and behaves as such. When people show their unhappiness with the way things are run it doesn't know how to respond except with force".¹³³ The government withdrew its backing for a number of the proposed tax increases in response to the growing outcry. But in a sign that it would not respond to events lying down, Home Affairs Minister Dumiso Dabengwa accused the trade unions of forming an "unholy alliance" with white employers.¹³⁴

By the end of 1997, Zimbabwe was in serious economic and political crisis. Spiralling food and fuel prices triggered urban strikes and political protests and radicalised the trade union movement. By 1998 about 400 elite blacks were leasing 400,000 hectares of state land, and about 350 blacks had bought their own farms.¹³⁵ Mugabe's mishandling of the war veterans issue, corruption and the economy had created something that elections since independence had not: a mobilised and united opposition.

¹³² Bond and Manyanya, *Zimbabwe's Plunge*, op. cit., p. xii.

¹³³ *The Guardian* (London), 19 December 1997.

¹³⁴ *The Times* (London), 11 December 1997.

¹³⁵ Sam Moyo, "The Interaction of Market and Compulsory Land Acquisition Processes with Social Action in Zimbabwe's Land Reform", in Ibbo Mandaza and Dan Nabudere (eds.), *Pan Africanism and Integration in Africa* (Harare: Sapco Books, 2003).