

# Land Troubles

*Reason why Mugabe is not a demon*

**George Monbiot**

*Business Times, Dar es Salaam, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2002*

## **Contents**

- The seizure of the White farms is both brutal and illegal
- The use of Food Aid and GM Crops as a Political Weapon
- The Global Dimensions to Land Dispossession
- Land Distribution offends the God of Free Markets

## **The seizure of the White farms is both brutal and illegal**

The most evil man on earth, after Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, is Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. That, at least, is the view of most of the Western world's press.

Recently, Mugabe insisted that 2,900 White farmers would have to leave their land. He claimed to be redistributing their property to landless peasants. But many of the farms he has seized have been handed instead to army officers and party loyalists.

Twelve white farmers have already been killed, and many others beaten in the process.

Mugabe stole the elections in March 2002 through ballot rigging and the intimidation of his political rivals.

His assault on White-owned farms has been cited by the (London-based) *Daily Telegraph* as the principal reason for the current famine. Now, the paper maintains, he is using "food aid as a political weapon".

As a candidate for the post of the *World's Third Most Evil Man*, he appears to possess all the right credentials.

There is no doubt that Mugabe is a ruthless man, or that his policies are contributing to further impoverishment of Zimbabweans. But to suggest that his land seizures are largely responsible for the nation's hunger is fanciful.

Though the 4,500 White farmers there own two-thirds of the best land, many of them grow not food but tobacco. Seventy percent of the nation's maize – its primary staple

crop – is grown by Black peasant farmers hacking a living from the marginal lands they were left by the whites.

The seizure of the White farms is both brutal and illegal. But it is merely one small scene in the tragedy now playing all over the world.

### **The Global Dimensions to Land Dispossession**

Every year, some tens of millions of peasant farmers are forced to leave their land, with devastating consequences for food security.

For them there are no tear stained descriptions of a last visit to the graves of their children. If they are mentioned at all, they are dismissed by most of the press as the necessary casualties of development.

Ten years ago, I investigated the expropriations being funded and organised in Africa by another member of the Commonwealth. Canada had paid for the ploughing and planting with wheat of the *Basotu Plains* in Tanzania.

Wheat was eaten in the country only by the rich, but by planting that crop, rather than maize or beans or cassava, Canada could secure contracts for its chemical and machinery companies, which were world leaders in wheat technology.

The scheme required the dispossession of the 40,000 members of the Barbaig tribe. Those who tried to return to their lands were beaten by the project's workers, imprisoned and tortured with electric shocks. The women were gang-raped.

For the first time in a century, the Barbaig were malnourished. When I raised these issues with one of the people running the project, she told me: *"I won't shed a tear for anybody if it means development."*

The rich world's press took much the same attitude: only the (London-based) *Guardian* carried the story.

Now yet another member of the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom, is funding a much bigger scheme in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh. Some 20 million people will be dispossessed. Again, this atrocity has been ignored by most of the media.

These are dark-skinned people being expelled by Whites, rather than Whites being expelled by Black people. They are, as such, assuming their rightful place, as invisible obstacles to the rich world's projects.

Mugabe is a Monster only because he has usurped the natural order. Throughout the coverage of Zimbabwe, there is an undercurrent of racism, and of regret that Britain ever let Rhodesia go.

Some of the articles in the *Telegraph* may as well have been headlined: *"The plucky men and women holding darkest Africa at bay."* Readers are led to conclude that Ian Smith was right all along: *the only people who know how to run Africa are the Whites.*

But, through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and bilateral aid programmes, with their extraordinary conditions, the Whites *do* run Africa: and a right hash they are making of it.

### **The use of Food Aid and GM Crops as a Political Weapon**

Over the last ten years, according to the UN's latest *Human Development Report*, the number of people in sub-Saharan Africa living on less than a dollar a day has risen from 242 million to 300 million. The more rigorously Africa's governments apply the policies demanded by the Whites, the poorer their people become.

Just like Mugabe, the rich world has also been using "*food aid as a political weapon*". The United States has just succeeded in forcing Zimbabwe and Zambia, both suffering from the Southern African famine, to accept *GM maize* as food relief.

Both nations had fiercely resisted GM crops, partly because they feared that the technology would grant multinational companies control over the food chain, leaving people still more vulnerable to hunger. But the US, seizing the opportunity for its biotech firms, told them that they must either accept this consignment or starve.

Malawi has also been obliged to take GM maize from the US, partly because of the loss of its own strategic grain reserve. In 1999, the IMF and the European Union instructed Malawi to *privatise* the reserve.

The private body was not capitalised, so it had to borrow from commercial banks to buy grain. Predictably enough, by 2001 it found that it couldn't service its debts. The IMF told it to sell most of the reserve.

The private body sold it all, and Malawi ran out of stored grain just as its crops failed. The IMF, having learnt nothing from this catastrophe, continues to prevent that country from helping its farmers, subsidising food or stabilising prices.

### **Land Distribution offends the God of Free Markets**

The same agency also forces weak nations to open their borders to subsidised food from abroad, destroying their own farming industries. Perhaps most importantly, it prevents State spending on land reform.

Land distribution is the key determinant of food security. Small farms are up to ten times as productive as large ones, as they tend to be cultivated more intensively. Small farmers are more likely to supply local people with staple crops than Western supermarkets with mangetout.

The governments of the rich world don't like land reform. It requires State intervention, which offends the god of free markets; and it hurts big farmers and the companies that supply them.

Indeed, it was Britain's refusal either to permit or to fund an adequate land reform programme in Zimbabwe that created the political opportunities Mugabe has so ruthlessly exploited.

The Lancaster House agreement gave the State to the Black population, but the Nation to the Whites. Mugabe manipulates the genuine frustrations of a dispossessed people.

The president of Zimbabwe is a very minor devil in the hellish politics of land and food. The sainted Nelson Mandela has arguably done just as much harm to the people of South Africa, by surrendering his powers to the IMF as soon as he had wrested them from apartheid.

Let us condemn Mugabe's attacks upon Zimbabwe's Whites by all means. But only if we are also prepared to condemn the far bloodier war the rich world wages against the poor.