Zimbabwe faces acute famine

Chris Talbot
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A warning from the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) predicts famine in Zimbabwe on a scale that present food distribution organised by the United Nations and aid agencies will be unable to cope with.

At one time regarded as the breadbasket of Southern Africa, Zimbabwe produced less than a quarter of its national cereal requirements in the last agricultural season.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that Zimbabwe needs 705,000 million tonnes of food aid between July 2002 and March 2003. The total current deficit is nearly 1.9 million tonnes; therefore, 1.1 million tonnes must be imported by either the government or the private sector in order to avoid a catastrophe. Given the cash-strapped position of the government and the contraction of private industry, FEWS says that the deficit is "unlikely to be met".

In Southern Africa as a whole, 12.8 million people are now facing starvation and over six million of these are in Zimbabwe. This figure amounts to half the country's population.

Despite the fact that the threat of famine has spread throughout Southern Africa after a severe drought, Western governments are holding back on aid and citing disruption of agriculture resulting from President Robert Mugabe's land redistribution programme as the cause of the famine. EU commissioner for humanitarian aid, Poul Nielson, blamed the food shortages on the Zimbabwean government saying that there has been "a political hijacking of the resources of the country." This is self-serving nonsense.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw claimed that the EU was using smart sanctions because it did not want to stop aid to the Zimbabwean people; a claim that is belied by the low amounts received by the WFP. The WFP has only received 22 percent of the $500 million it asked for from Western governments at the beginning of July.

Last year Zimbabwe asked donors for $83.6 million in food aid, but received only half this amount. There are now food shortages throughout the country, with reports of long queues for maize: the staple diet. Rural areas are worst affected, with harrowing reports from aid workers of malnutrition among children. Before the current food shortages there was already widespread poverty. Many families have no adult wage earners because HIV/AIDS affects more than 30 percent of the population. The economic situation has now become so serious that there is a shortage of basic commodities such as salt, sugar, soap, cooking oil, margarine, poultry and milk.

Large sections of industry are closing down. Last year the gross domestic product fell by seven percent. Production costs have gone up by over 100 percent a year due to the cost of importing materials. The official exchange rate is $Z55 to $US1, but the black market rate is as high as $Z1,000 for every US dollar and the government is running out of foreign exchange. Private firms are unable to get credit abroad. They are now doing business on a cash basis and have to produce bank guarantees before any transaction can go ahead.

Neither the government nor the private sector can fill the gap between aid and the unprecedented food shortages reported by the UN. The demonising of Mugabe in circumstances where six million face death by starvation is a convenient diversion from the responsibility of those individuals, institutions and governments who control the world's resources in the West.

Economic decline had already set in long before the current crisis. Zimbabwe followed the IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes more rigourously than most underdeveloped countries. In 1995 the World Bank judged the Zimbabwean government performance as "highly satisfactory." As a result, Zimbabwe was forced into more and more debt with the Western banks. In 1998, a year before Mugabe came into conflict with the IMF, Zimbabwe owed nearly $US5 billion in foreign debt and was using more than a third of its export earnings in servicing debt. Between 1990 and 1995 Zimbabwe's GDP fell by one fifth, while foreign debt climbed by 55 percent.

Though relatively prosperous, with an expanding health and education system through the 1980s, Zimbabwe followed the rest of sub-Saharan Africa being hit by falling commodity prices and getting deeper into debt. Zimbabwe depended on the export of tobacco and agricultural commodities from the large white-owned commercial farms and from the output of mines, largely owned by foreign corporations. The value of agricultural exports has fallen by more than 30 percent since 1996 and of minerals by 24 percent according to recent figures from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

Land reform was a response to this developing economic crisis, rather than the cause of it. The inequitable distribution of land is a cause of great resentment in Zimbabwe, as the best land was seized from the black population by colonialists and white settlers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Mugabe and the ZANU-PF regime allowed the few thousand white commercial farmers to continue occupying the bulk of the fertile agricultural land after independence in 1980. Although a third of the population live in cities, millions of black Zimbabweans were still eking out an existence on the communal land that was left. Only when serious economic decline and IMF demands threatened their rule in the year 2000, did the ZANU-PF elite launch the land redistribution programme.

Faced with strikes and growing opposition in the cities, ZANU-PF attempted to maintain its rule by building popular support in the countryside.

The pro-Western Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) built up a urban base of support that could challenge Mugabe's rule, so ZANU-PF backed the seizure of land by the National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWA). Before the threat from the MDC, ZANU-PF had largely suppressed the demands of the war veterans for land distribution.

Now the Zimbabwe government claims to be completing the "acquisition" phase of its land programme, with most of the 2,000 or so remaining white farms targeted for government takeover. But no accurate figures are available and, contrary to the media campaign of the white farmers, it seems likely that some will stay in production and land holdings of foreign multinationals will remain untouched.

Figures released by the government owned *Herald* newspaper reveal that the land programme cannot ensure the economic future of the mass of the population. The government claims that it has allocated land to 354,000 farmers. The real number is probably smaller and must be compared with the millions said to be wanting land and the hundreds of thousands of black farm labourers made unemployed.

This has had a negative effect on production in Zimbabwe, but not to the extent that it can be blamed for a famine that extends throughout Southern Africa.

Without inputs, infrastructure and training, the new farmers will not survive. Agriculture minister Joseph Made was previously reported as saying that $Z160 billion was needed to finance land reform. The Zimbabwe Farmers Union, which represents the newly settled farmers and peasants, expressed concerns that estimates of aid are being scaled down. So far the government has made a tiny $Z16.5 billion available over a three year period that runs up until next December.

Large highly productive units like the white commercial farms are a clear argument for collective farming. Small farmers could only benefit from taking over the land in this context.

The government is now pleading with the private sector to make more funds available. "We have put the elections behind us," said Made. "Everyone who is constructive must begin playing their part to fully realise the potential of the economy, which is land based." To imagine that the private sector will invest in agriculture under conditions of economic disintegration, falling commodity prices and rampant inflation, exposes the ridiculous nature of ZANU-PF's economics.

The *Herald* has called for African "economic self-determination", appealing to "indigenous" capitalists to invest. After demagogic attacks on the IMF and Western powers, it also calls for investment from Thailand, Malaysia, Libya and other underdeveloped countries. So far Libya has traded oil with Zimbabwe in exchange for large scale tourist facilities, but even this is likely to stop under pressure from the EU.

It is doubtful how seriously the elite in Zimbabwe take their own national self-sufficiency rhetoric, since it is known that the military tops are protecting their interests by engaging in large scale mining and logging operations in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Zimbabwean troops have propped up the regime in the DRC for the last four years and have been granted these concessions in exchange.

As the economy collapses, Mugabe and ZANU-PF are following the elections with preparations to repress widespread hostility to their rule. A series of new laws have been passed including a Freedom of Information and Right to Privacy Bill and one on Public Order and Security. The former will mean that journalists can only operate with a government licence, effectively gagging the press. The latter makes it illegal to "undermine the authority of the President", "make abusive, obscene or false statements against the President," and so on. It will give police powers to stop public meetings and lock up political opposition.

Although MDC members have been beaten up and arrested, the regime still fears riots or other political movements will arise as the conditions worsen. Even the BBC correspondent, normally favourable to the MDC, states that "there is a growing sense among many activists that the MDC has failed to rally effectively after the party's defeat in the disputed presidential elections last March." MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai was "hesitant" about leading mass protests, worrying that "public anger would erupt spontaneously".

A rift has also developed between the government and the ZNLWA war veterans who led the land occupations. Andrew Ndlovu, the war veterans secretary for projects, has condemned the government "for brutalising fellow blacks" and evicting them from farms. A week later Ndlovu and another leading war veteran were jailed for three years on corruption charges.

War veteran secretary for security, Mike Moyo, claimed that the ZANU-PF leadership wanted to "gag radical voices and create a morbid bunch of yes men." Interviewed in the pro-government newspaper, the *Zimbabwe Mirror*, Mike Moyo protested at the government's closure of the private broadcasting company Joy TV, in which the war veterans have a stake. He complained that "counter revolutionaries in the executive were manipulating the state's ideological apparatus" and repressing the war veterans now that the presidential election was over.

War veterans are now said to be discussing breaking away from ZANU-PF to form their own political party. It is top ZANU-PF officials who have reaped the benefit of the land seizures. An article in the *Mirror* protests that many of the plots of land seized in the occupations have gone to ZANU-PF officials and ministers. Stating that "the once noble land reform programme is under threat", it attacked the "appalling misconduct" of members of the government elite. "The very people who are being driven by greed to plunder, not only the occupied colonial settler's land but the very land that their comrades —war vets—occupied and made use of since 2000."

Meanwhile it seems that the Western powers, having failed to see Mugabe replaced by the MDC in the elections, are now prepared to punish Zimbabwe as the famine spreads and economic decline continues. They are prepared to allow thousands to die of starvation, as they are already allowing AIDS to rip through the African population.

Whether the West will attempt to prop-up Tsvangirai or help finance an alternative movement, or just rely on the machinations of other African leaders, possibly with military interventions, is not yet clear. Either way the results of both Western IMF policies and African nationalism have been a disaster for the people of Zimbabwe and provide a forceful argument for the development of socialist policies for the whole continent.