

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Zimbabwe's loss, Mozambique's gain

Michael Holman suggests a cross-border resettlement programme for white farmers that would allow southern Africa to retain scarce expertise

Any hopes of resolving the crisis in Zimbabwe while Robert Mugabe remains in power were dashed at the Johannesburg summit this week. The country's 76-year-old president was brutally frank when he spelt out his objective: to end the days when commercial farming in Zimbabwe was dominated by white farmers. Speaking in front of a packed house and the world's media, he lost no opportunity to show his contempt for Tony Blair.

At first sight, the sympathetic response to Mr Mugabe's speech may suggest that he has more support on the African continent than many had believed. It may also give the impression that Mr Blair is powerless to help a country where a double tragedy is unfolding.

The chaos in Zimbabwe's farm sector is exacerbating the effects of drought in the

region. The consequences are still unfolding but could be catastrophic. And the region is losing one of Africa's scarcest resources: a group of people who, whatever their shortcomings in terms of vision and tact, are technically qualified, experienced and dedicated.

The reality, however, is that Mr Blair still has cards he could play. The problem is that he may not realise he holds them in his hand.

For a start, in Joaquim Chissano, president of Mozambique, and Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's leader, Mr Blair has two important allies in southern Africa. He should draw on the respect and influence they command in the region. But he should not ask them to apply sanctions: Zimbabwe's tourism, once the leading foreign exchange earner, has dwindled to near insignificance, agriculture is in rapid decline, inflation is in three

figures and the currency is grossly overvalued. These problems are pushing Zimbabwe ever closer to collapse and the two men fear that any additional measures could precipitate the crisis they want to avoid.

Second, Mr Blair should recall (or learn) the lessons of Britain's colonial past – and help put them into effect.

About 40 years ago, Britain had to defuse an explosive situation in Kenya. A few hundred white farmers held more than 8m acres of the best land and memories were fresh of a guerrilla war to dislodge them. More than 6,000 British soldiers had been sent out to protect the farmers and suppress the rebellion in which 37 settlers and more than 10,000 "terrorists" were to die. The country's 6m African majority, impatient for change, controlled parliament. Full independence from Britain was only months away and land

redistribution was high on the agenda.

"Is European farming going to carry on?" asked an anxious writer at the time. "Can the country keep going when it turns sound economic farms into subsistence units? Farming and expediency are at loggerheads," he concluded.

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The British government – with World Bank help – was able to resolve a crisis with a well funded resettlement programme. It was prepared to be the main contributor to a £20m land resettlement fund – worth £250m at today's prices – to help pay for the redistribution of former white farms.

As part of this redistribu-

tion, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, then the aid arm of the British government, launched what was to prove its most successful agricultural co-operative in Africa: the Kenya Tea Development Authority. The authority has since been privatised but the original lessons hold firm:

good infrastructure, timely availability of inputs and decent management are the essential ingredients of successful farming.

Tragically, the programme was never implemented in Zimbabwe: by the time the country won independence in 1980, the British government's purse strings were much tighter, even though

Zimbabwe then had about 5,000 white farmers – five times as many as Kenya. The UK's initial contribution to Zimbabwe's land resettlement programme was just £30m – £75m at today's prices. And while a further £14m was provided, and an additional £36m has been promised, the total is well under half the support that Kenya received.

Mr Mugabe has made it impossible for the promised £36m to be spent in Zimbabwe. But the money is there and it can be spent in the region, using an agency with a record of success.

It would be unrealistic to expect now that Mr Mugabe would agree with the British government or the European Union on a proper process for transferring land from the white farmers who currently own it to the black farmers who believe they should own it. But there are other options.

One is to look over the

border to Mozambique, where there is land available and, more importantly, the government has a pragmatism born of experience: it is still coming to terms with the economic effects of the exodus of its white minority in the tumultuous months that marked independence from Portugal in 1975.

One result of that pragmatism is that the government has made land available for purchase, or long-term lease, to the commercial farmers of Zimbabwe. So far, no more than a handful of them have taken it up. Most of the 3,000 who are being evicted do not have the capital; what they have is tied up in Zimbabwe, in the near-worthless local currency. And even if they do have the capital, life is tough in Mozambique: there is only rudimentary infrastructure in much of the country. (Ironically, that was destroyed in the 1970s by white Rhodesia's armed forces and their local allies,

but that is another story.)

It should be possible to find a solution for farmers with no land in a country where land is available but commercial farming expertise is in short supply. What is needed is a little imagination and some nerve.

CDC still invests in Africa and is the obvious vehicle for a resettlement scheme in Mozambique. Agriculture has fallen out of favour with CDC because returns are low. This is usually because management is poor, which should not be the case in this instance. But if CDC is not willing to act, there is nothing to stop Britain's international development ministry setting up a vehicle specifically for this purpose.

There could be no better way to tackle poverty in southern Africa.

The writer was Africa editor of the Financial Times from 1984 until this year. He was brought up in Zimbabwe