

A Farm Disaster of a Different Color

Mugabe's Land-Seizure Campaign Leaves a Black-Owned Business in Ruin

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ODZI, Zimbabwe -- Where rows of sweet corn once grew, there are now brown and dead stalks. Where beans once sprouted, there are weeds. And where 5,000 Zimbabweans long made a good living off the land, there is hunger.

Similar scenes are common on farms, most previously owned by white Zimbabweans, across this southern African nation after four years of violent land seizures under President Robert Mugabe. What is different about the Kondozi farm is that the owner of the business that was confiscated is black.

Edwin Moyo, who owned 52 percent of Kondozi, thrived at what was traditionally a white man's business in this former British colony, running a horticultural company that stocked vegetable bins throughout Britain and brought in \$15 million a year to this poor corner of a poor nation.

But under a farm seizure program Mugabe has said was necessary to redistribute the ownership of land, Moyo's business met the same ruin as those owned by thousands of whites. On Good Friday, in April, dozens of police arrived with water cannons and submachine guns, Moyo said, and blocked off the road, looted the offices and beat anyone who sought to resist.

"This is something I wanted to do as a black man . . . so I could look after other people," said Moyo, 46, who owns several other business interests in Zimbabwe.

In an interview, Moyo did not blame Mugabe or his ruling ZANU-PF party, which controls most aspects of the national economy. Instead, Moyo vaguely accused "certain greedy individuals," whom he did not name, of taking Kondozi.

But former employees of the farm, opposition leaders and independent journalists say Kondozi represents the reality of land reform in Zimbabwe, where there are few, if any, checks on government power and those who wield it.

Moyo's former employees, most of whom are still out of work, said a group of top government officials who live in the area coveted Kondozi for themselves and were eager to punish independent farmers, seeing them as the financial base for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

The toll has been high for thousands of workers, their families and the region. One former employee, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of government retribution, said he had lost income equal to \$100 a month -- a good wage in Zimbabwe -- plus housing and living expenses.

"Now it's disaster," he said. "I've got nothing right now."

Twenty-two farmers, most of whom are black and who sold beans, corn, melons and other crops under contract to Kondozi, also lost their livelihoods. Hundreds of other workers were employed by these smaller farms, many of which have stopped producing.

The attack was even more startling to those here because the High Court of Zimbabwe had ruled in February that the government could not take Kondozi.

The government, in newspapers it owns, has repeatedly portrayed the seizure of Kondozi as an unvarnished success of land reform and contended that the farm has resumed its earlier productivity.

But a recent visit showed that on Kondozi's 550 acres, only a few fields still had crops, and those were stunted and immature. Most fields were overgrown with weeds, including an inedible reddish plant that Zimbabweans call "witch's wheat."

Mayor Misheck Kagurabadza of nearby Mutare, Zimbabwe's third-largest city, about 25 miles from Kondozi, said suffering in the area had been widespread since the farm was seized.

Former workers and their families come to the mayor's office looking for help buying food, or a few dollars to pay school fees for their children. The situation is worse in the rural areas, the mayor said, because the prospects for work are slimmer there.

"People who used to work in that area, they are really in trouble," said Kagurabadza, a member of the Movement for Democratic Change.

Since Zimbabwean authorities began seizing land in 2000, they have taken thousands of farms, often by threatening and attacking farmers and their families.

The government has said the farms will remain the property of the state, but leases of 99 years have been given to members of the political elite. Some cabinet members have received several farms each, a development that even Mugabe has criticized.

"A man can have as many wives as he wants as long as he can look after them," Mugabe said last week in Harare, the capital. "Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about farms."

The former farm owners, most of whom are white, in many cases have fled to Britain, Australia or over the border to Zambia, where the agricultural industry is suddenly booming.

The former farm workers, almost all of whom are black, often have been left destitute because new managers often lack expertise, training and equipment. In the process, Zimbabwe has been transformed from a nation that was known as southern Africa's breadbasket into a country where hunger is common.

In April, the same month Kondozi was seized, the U.N. World Food Program reported feeding 4.5 million Zimbabweans, roughly one-third of the nation's population. Millions of citizens have fled to South Africa and other countries in search of work and food.

Two decades after white rule ended in 1980, most of the country's best farmland had belonged to several thousand white farmers. Although many Zimbabweans said they were uneasy about the ruthlessness used to seize the farms and were troubled by the hunger that resulted, there initially was support for the idea of reclaiming the most fertile land from the descendants of colonizers.

But the takeover of Kondozi provoked a reaction different from that regarding earlier farm seizures. Many Zimbabweans were puzzled over how the government could take a business that was owned by a black man, employed so many people and generated so much precious foreign currency.

In defending the takeover, despite the High Court's ruling in February, officials pointed out that although Moyo was majority owner of the business, a white family owned the land.

Yet even within Mugabe's party, the seizure provoked outrage so intense it caused a rare public fracture. Vice President Joseph Msika, who oversees land redistribution for Mugabe, sought to block the takeover.

But in an interview with the Zimbabwe Independent in May, Msika said he had no choice but to back away from the issue after discussing it with Mugabe. In the same interview, Msika blamed the farm seizure on "immoral little boys" whom he did not name.

"More people must be included in the ownership of the concerns, but not through violent and barbaric ways," Msika told the weekly newspaper. "Personally, as the chairman of the land task force, I wouldn't accept having the army and police descending on farms to forcibly evict owners, farm workers or peasants. Such actions cast a bad image on the land issue that has been a success generally."

As Kondozi's workers struggle, Moyo said he has moved on. He has written off the debt from the farm and turned his attention to a processing plant he bought in Zambia. It employs 9,000 people, a success that is bittersweet for Moyo, who said he would rather see those jobs in Zimbabwe, at Kondozi.

But, he said: "It is over and done with. This farm is gone. There's nothing to be done."