

Analysis of the Situation of Displaced Farm Workers in Zimbabwe

Refugees International

August 13, 2004

Executive Summary

Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Program and politically-motivated intimidation and harassment have created an internally displaced population of more than 150,000 former farm workers and have also caused thousands of Zimbabweans to flee their country. The Government of Zimbabwe refuses to acknowledge that their implementation of the land redistribution program has caused forced displacement. To further compound the issue, governmental authorities have increasingly restricted access to farming areas for humanitarian agencies and independent analysts making it difficult for the displaced and other vulnerable groups to access humanitarian assistance.

During an assessment mission to Zimbabwe conducted in June 2004, *Refugees International* was able to document incidents of targeted violence against former workers, such as the destruction of homes and wells, the latter resulting in the deaths of children due to diarrheal diseases contracted from drinking unclean water. *RI* also found displaced populations effectively abandoned due to Government of Zimbabwe prevention of assistance efforts by international agencies and local non-governmental organizations.

Many of the commercial farms that were marked for acquisition under the Fast Track Land reform were seized violently. However, not all of the former farm workers have been displaced due to violent eviction. Displacement is also due to economic conditions on the former commercial farms.

Within the former farm workers, there are five groups:

- People internally "trapped," who are unable to leave their farms;
- People displaced temporarily to forested or uncultivated areas;
- Returnees to communal areas;
- Peri-urban squatters;
- Refugees and economic migrants.

Within these groups, foreign workers are particularly at risk.

In addition, there are other vulnerable groups that are not necessarily displaced and not specifically former farm workers, but who are also being denied services and are in need of assistance. These include some new settlers, orphan-headed households and households without an able-bodied adult.

A considerable portion of the former farm worker population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Many have little or no access to food, shelter, medical care,

clean water, sanitation services, and education. While international and national humanitarian agencies are willing and able to provide assistance, national and local authorities are actively closing down any avenues of access to this vulnerable population. The best way to rebuild trust between the government of Zimbabwe and the humanitarian community is for all actors involved to focus and adhere to humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality, and non-discrimination while working in coordination to provide assistance on the basis of need.

Recommendations

Refugees International recommends that:

The Government of Zimbabwe

- Acknowledge that former farm workers are increasingly vulnerable and take steps to meet their basic needs, including allowing humanitarian agencies to provide direct assistance to them.
- Form mixed needs assessment teams with local NGOs to conduct visits and ascertain the exact levels of vulnerability of groups living in the former commercial farming areas.
- Provide access to land to those former farm workers that, due to unemployment and increasing destitution, are unable to meet their subsistence needs.
- Invest in skills training and education for those farm workers who have not been retained in the commercial agriculture sector in order to allow redeployment to other economic sectors.
- Improve living conditions in squatter camps and informal settlements that host considerable numbers of former farm workers. When available, land should be allocated to them and basic community services should be upgraded.

The Government of Zimbabwe and the United Nations:

- Jointly undertake a comprehensive vulnerability assessment in the commercial farming areas, rural communal lands and informal settlement. Due to the distrust between the Government of Zimbabwe and the United Nations, it is also recommended that a neutral party agreed upon by both should be included in the process of forming the assessment teams.
- Devise and implement a plan of action to strengthen vital community services, such as health clinics, water points and primary education facilities in areas affected by incoming groups of former farm workers.

The Donor Community:

- Devote greater financial resources to the former commercial farm areas to address humanitarian needs. These resources should be allocated based exclusively on degree of vulnerability of beneficiaries.

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The following analysis of the current humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe does not address the political reasons for or against the Fast Track Land Reform program, which attempted to address the inequalities of land ownership in Zimbabwe. This briefing paper instead focuses on how that program has in effect re-distributed the farm worker population and identifies those groups who are currently vulnerable and require urgent humanitarian assistance.

Background of Fast Track Land Reform Program

Since 2000, the economic situation of Zimbabwe has been progressively deteriorating. The production of food has dropped and inflation has skyrocketed to about 400 % a year. Unemployment has spread rapidly. An estimated 78% of farm workers, who represented 25% of the national active working force, have lost their jobs. This crisis has been caused by the consequences of the poor implementation of the Government of Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform program, compounded by the recent regional drought that has affected crop production.

Characterized by compulsory evictions and seizures of the mainly white-owned commercial farms, the Fast Track Land Reform program, which began in 2000, was intended to benefit the landless, who had been living in congested settlements throughout Zimbabwe. According to governmental data, by mid-2002, approximately two percent of former farm workers had been given land. A survey conducted before the beginning of the program indicated that 53% of the former farm workers wanted access to land. In addition, despite the Government of Zimbabwe's stated goal of addressing inequities in land ownership, only 16 percent of the redistributed land has gone to women, replicating the biases of traditional land holding and the previous farm ownership rates.

Some of the farms were taken over by political allies of the ruling ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front) party, while others were handed over to genuine “new settlers,” many of whom did not have a background in commercial farming. Despite official statements proclaiming the completion of the program in 2002, compulsory land acquisitions are far from over. According to press

reports, more than 900 farms have been listed for compulsory acquisition since the beginning of 2004, mainly in the three Mashonaland provinces: Manicaland, Midlands, and Masvingo.

Displacement from Commercial Farms

Despite the government of Zimbabwe's refusal to acknowledge it, the Fast Track Land Reform Program has caused forced displacement of former farm workers.

Many of the commercial farms that were marked for acquisition under the Fast Track Land Reform program were seized violently. There are extensive reports of "war veterans"¹ and ZANU-PF youth militia entering farms and intimidating the farm owners. The ruling party and its militant supporters accuse the farm workers of being supporters of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), or being "unpatriotic" for sympathizing with white farmers. In many cases, the workers were ordered to leave their houses instantly, unable even to collect their belongings. Ruling party militants destroyed houses and machines that operated boreholes to push farmers and farm workers off the land and to ensure that former farm workers could not return. NGOs in Zimbabwe have documented cases of human rights abuses, including physical assault and intimidation, and political "brainwashing" used to break the former farm workers' allegiance to the political opposition. In some cases, people were ferried to communal areas or even dumped at road sides.

Not all of the former farm workers have been displaced due to violent eviction. Displacement is also due to economic conditions on the former commercial farms. Some of the new settlers have been unable to farm their allotment of land. Their lack of financial capital and their lower production capacity, due to lack of essential agricultural inputs, has proved insufficient to maintain the same working force of farm workers. They also lack the capacity to provide the services to the farm worker population that previous commercial farmers provided. Only a few farm workers have been able to continue to work on a permanent basis, but they usually do so with dramatically reduced salaries.

Former farm workers lost their regular income and have turned to short term or seasonal contracts, piecework on other farms, or activities such as gold panning and hunting of game for commercial sales. The rapid impoverishment of the former farm worker community has also led to displacement from the former commercial farms in search of better economic opportunities elsewhere. Some former farm workers have returned to their traditional rural lands in hopes of supporting their families through subsistence agriculture or have moved to peri-urban squatter camps in the hope of finding work near the cities. In some cases, the former farm workers have actually returned to the farms to eke out whatever living they can.

¹ Many of the beneficiaries of the Fast Track Land Reform program were called "war vets." Some are veterans from Zimbabwe's independence struggle from the 1970s but some are obviously too young to have served in the war. However, most of the people interviewed used the term war vets to include all of the new settlers, no matter what their status.

How many internally displaced?

Due to the complexity of the situation for former farm workers and the obstacles put in place by the current Government of Zimbabwe, assessing the dimension of forced displacement is very difficult. In 2000, there were an estimated 315,000 farm worker households. Using an average household size of five and taking into account that 50% of the farm workers were single, *RI* concludes that there were approximately 1 million former farm workers and dependants at the time of the Fast Track Land Reform program. Of these farm workers, an estimated 50 to 70 percent have remained on the farms.

Recently, operational humanitarian agencies have suggested that displaced households currently number around 40,000, of which only 19,000 households have received some sort of assistance. Based on these figures, *RI* estimates that more than 150,000 individuals were forced to leave their areas of habitual residence on farms due to economic distress and personal insecurity following harassment and intimidation by groups of individuals employed by the Government of Zimbabwe.

The Government of Zimbabwe refuses to acknowledge that people are being forcibly displaced, claiming that all former farm workers had a choice in whether or not to leave the farms. The Government prefers to define them with the phrase “mobile vulnerable populations.” The nature of forced displacement observed by *RI* in Zimbabwe corresponds to the internationally recognized legal definition of internal displacement². If the Government admitted that internally displaced persons existed within Zimbabwe, this admission would highlight its failure to take responsibility in providing protection and assistance to the displaced populations.

In addition to denying their role in the displacement, the Government of Zimbabwe has also restricted humanitarian access to farming areas. This has prevented both the gathering of reliable data on the numbers of people affected by the crisis and the delivery of the humanitarian assistance to vulnerable groups.

Vulnerable Groups: Former farm workers and others

Within the former farm workers, there are five groups:

- People internally “trapped,” who are unable to leave their farms;
- People displaced temporarily to forested areas;
- Returnees to communal areas;
- Peri-urban squatters;
- Refugees and economic migrants.

Within these groups, foreign workers are particularly at risk.

² According to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Francis Deng, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement should provide guidance to governments. They define internal displaced persons as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”

In addition, there are other vulnerable groups that are not necessarily displaced and not specifically former farm workers, but who are also being denied services and are in need of assistance. These include some new settlers and households without an able-bodied adult.

Female former farm workers are also at additional risk. Many female farm workers were not paid mandatory "severance packages" by the former farmers when their farms were seized. Many of the men have left the farms to migrate to neighboring countries in search of work, leaving their wives and children behind. Other male heads of household have died in the political violence and left behind widows. Some former female farm workers without an adult male in the household have had to resort to risky strategies to survive. Some have turned to commercial sex work and others have formed sexual alliances with farm foremen or new settlers in order to be guaranteed some sort of farm employment to feed their children. In addition, these women told *RI* that the combination of transportation costs to nearby towns and the costs of condoms and birth control pills were too high for them to pay, putting them at increased risk for HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies.

People internally "trapped"

Former farm workers have generally opted to stay on the farms, leaving only under extreme duress. Very often, former farm workers are "trapped" on the land. Those who remain on the farms have few livelihood options and their future is bleak. Some find themselves near starvation with no access to food or services. "They broke our water pump to chase off the white farmer when they invaded the farm," a farm worker told us. "We now have to take our water straight from the stream and over 20 children have died here from diarrhea." At another farm, former farm workers complained that there had been an outbreak of malaria on the farm as they did not have equipment to drain standing water. They told us, "The former farmer used to do this but they broke his equipment when they chased him off the farm." Some new settlers encourage this situation in order to weaken the population so that former farm workers must provide labor at far below their former salaries. "When the new settlers came, they threatened to evict us if we complained about the conditions," one farm worker told *RI*. Another told us, "Our relations with the new settlers are not good. They do not pay us. Hunger forces me to go there but we have no choice." The former farm workers resort to other strategies to make a living, but many eventually end up working at drastically reduced wages or in exchange for goods such as food or school uniforms for their children.

In other cases, particularly on farms that have been seized by farmers affiliated with opposition parties, farm workers are under constant intimidation. "No go" zones are set up around these farms after they are seized and the former farm workers are literally trapped --- prevented from leaving the farm. "If they are evicted, they become more visible," explained a local organization. Because their former bosses were opposed to the ruling party, the farm workers are considered loyal to him and the opposition party. The farm workers are subjected to intimidation through so-called "pungwes" (all night rallies in support of Zanu-PF) where they are "taught how to cast their votes." In the Kondozi and Charleswood farms in Manicaland province, some 5,000 families have been surrounded by the police and military since April of this year. No one has been

able to enter the farm to assess the conditions of these internally “trapped,” but reports say people are not allowed to leave and are under constant threats.

While these operations are not a massive phenomenon, they certainly indicate a pattern corresponding to political and electoral considerations. As the March 2005 general parliamentary elections approach, *RI* expects this policy to continue and more farm workers will have to endure intimidation and harassment.

People displaced temporarily to forested areas

Some farm workers are displaced to forested areas as a result of forced evictions. With very few items or no belongings, they struggle to survive. For instance, *RI* learned of 800 families living in the forest after being chased off of their farm compound. They do not have access to clean water or basic health care. Humanitarian access is blocked by government forces but a humanitarian agency has managed to provide food and other supplies, delivering them to alternative sites. Another group of 36 households in Manicaland province were forced out of their farm and settled temporarily in the forest along the border with Mozambique. Even though it is winter in Zimbabwe, they were forced to flee without anything but the clothes on their back. Camped under plastic sheeting and sleeping on the ground, they had no food provisions and were afraid to remain there as they feared that border patrols would target their settlement as an opposition training camp or mobilizing facility. Under threat of discovery by the Government, they finally found sanctuary in safe houses rented in the suburbs.

Returnees to communal areas

Some evicted farm workers had links to their traditional rural communal areas in Zimbabwe. After the re-allocation of lands, they moved their families back to these areas. However, not all farm workers had this option. In Mashonaland Central, most farm workers had no rural homes and were forced to remain on the farms. In Mashonaland East, most moved to their communal areas. Although the returning former farm workers brought additional pressure on their family members, they have been better able to cope with the consequences of displacement than other groups. They also generally have access to some land. However, they are not completely immune to the problems facing the other former farm workers. “Displaced people that return to communal areas have no source of income so they are a drain on the already strained local resources,” a local humanitarian organization working in the rural areas told *RI*. There have been reports of former farm workers having to leave the rural communal areas because of continued harassment by ZANU-PF party loyalists who followed them from their former farms. “Violence follows the displaced there,” said another humanitarian organization. “They target the displaced as the political opposition and say ‘if you can’t join us, we’ll beat ‘em.’”

Peri-urban squatters

Some former farm workers have integrated into existing populations of unemployed, under-employed and low-income earners living in squatters’ camps or informal settlements such as Porta Farm near Harare or Gambuli settlement in Makonde District. These farm workers have had difficulties earning a living as they compete with the

existing population. Former farm workers interviewed by *RI* mentioned collecting fire wood and fishing as their main economic activities. “We have nowhere else to go. We will stay here until they force us to go elsewhere.” The majority of the displaced did not have access to land when they moved to these settlements. Basic services, such as housing and primary education facilities are partially available, although their availability is limited. Sanitary facilities are insufficient and clean water is scarce. Diseases such as cholera and dysentery are prevalent. Health facilities are limited to mobile clinics as the alternative is to cover long distances in order to access expensive urban medical centers.

Refugees and economic migrants

Many former farm workers fled to the neighboring countries of Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, and Mozambique. Some former farm workers, mostly skilled foremen, have followed former commercial farmers to their new farms in neighboring countries. Others have used traditional migration routes, seeking employment as farm workers in the border areas of South Africa. However, despite the economic aspects of this migration, many of the former farm workers also left Zimbabwe due to political persecution and should be considered genuine refugees. *RI* interviewed a Zimbabwean working illegally in South Africa on a farm near the border. “I was working in the cane fields near the border with South Africa. I jumped the border and left my wife and three children behind. I was chased off the farm because of politics. During the elections, I was forced to vote for the leading party – ZANU-PF. They assaulted me for a vote for ZANU-PF. Others have also fled but I don’t know where. I can only return to see my family for a few hours. If I stay longer, I can be considered MDC. The war veterans are around and stay on the farms. I want to bring my family here with me. When the vets hear that I have been home, they try to intimidate them.” Another farm worker that *RI* interviewed in Johannesburg said, “I want to go back to Zimbabwe but I can’t because there we are living in fear. We have no future.”

Other Vulnerable Groups

Former farm workers of foreign origin

Farm workers of foreign origin represent one of most vulnerable groups. One-fifth (approximately 80,000 workers and their families) of the former farm workers are descendents of migrant workers from Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. Many were born in Zimbabwe. Most lack national identity cards or birth certificates. They have also lost ties with their country of origin and have no place to return to when evicted from the farms. “Some of us are from Mozambique and Malawi,” a farm worker “trapped” on his land explained to *RI*. “Our friends and family have no place to go so we stay here.” Unlike other former farm workers, they cannot rely on traditional or local government leaders to gain access to land or humanitarian assistance. “We don’t have any place to go,” said a Mozambican farm worker, “While the Zimbabweans have picked up their things and gone to the rural areas. We feel the situation is becoming unbearable.”

Reversing a previously complex and expensive procedure that effectively disenfranchised the foreign workers, the 2004 Amendment to the Citizenship Act now grants citizenship to all people with parents from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) who were born in Zimbabwe. But since many farm workers did not have the opportunity to register for birth certificates, there remain significant doubts about the administrative capacity of the Government to provide national identity registration.

Newly resettled farmers

The land reform has also negatively impacted the livelihood of some of the beneficiaries of the Fast Track Land Reform program, the so-called “new settlers.” While many of the farms were “re-distributed” to political cronies of the ZANU-PF, some actually went to formerly landless people. These new settlers have been unable to fully use their land due to a lack of essential agricultural inputs such as draught power, quality seeds, and fertilizer, and lack of funds needed to hire the labor that is essential for large-scale commercial farming. In a few instances, some settlers have since returned to their original homes due to hardship. Many of the new settlers on the former commercial farms refuse to or cannot pay minimum wage to farm workers. The former farm workers accuse them of using intimidation, hunger, and other methods to get the farm workers to work for them in “slave labor” conditions. Relations between new settlers and former farm workers are often quite antagonistic. A displaced female farm worker told us “I can’t go back there and work for them. We did not leave nicely.” In some case, new settlers are preventing NGOs from providing food assistance, since the assistance constitutes a disincentive for the workers to accept the low wages being offered. “If we have food aid, they will tell us we have to leave the farm,” an internally trapped farm worker told *RI*. “They know we will not work for them if we are not starving.”

Households without an able bodied adult

Households headed by the elderly, the chronically ill or children and orphans have the least ability and resources to cope with the insecurity created by the land reform. There is a high HIV/AIDS prevalence rate within former farming communities. The increased insecurity brought by the land reform program has also increased the susceptibility of former farm workers to HIV/AIDS, resulting in large numbers of households without an able bodied adult. Tuberculosis and diarrheal diseases are prevalent on the farms as clean water, food, and health care, never readily available before the Land Reform program, are becoming extremely limited.

It is estimated that there are anywhere from 900,000 to 1.2 million orphans in Zimbabwe. There is an average of 12 orphans per commercial farm in some provinces. Most orphans do not attend school as they are unable to pay school fees or buy mandatory school uniforms. Older orphans drift into towns to work as prostitutes and add to the expanding street-children population. There has also been an increase of child labor as employers seeking cheap labor are exploiting desperate orphans. “It’s just so exploitative, said a local organization. “Child labor is increasing reflecting the desperation of the situation.”

Restricted access to vulnerable populations

A considerable portion of the former farm worker population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Many have little or no access to food, shelter, medical care, clean water, sanitation services and education. The Government of Zimbabwe's refusal to recognize the needs of the former farm workers will only accelerate the deterioration of living conditions for thousands of people, turning them from poor to destitute. While international and national humanitarian agencies are willing and able to provide assistance, national and local authorities are actively blocking access to this vulnerable population. Some NGOs reach needed groups but are treated with suspicion by the government. NGOs are considered "suspicious" because of funding from "unfriendly" foreign countries (countries that have criticized the Government of Zimbabwe's actions), because members are deemed sympathetic to or are members of the political opposition, or because their actions illustrate that the land reform program has been unsuccessful in addressing inequity in land ownership.

Local authorities have increased restrictions on NGO movement through a series of new administrative requirements. These administrative requirements include requiring the signing of new memorandums of understanding restricting access, demanding at least two weeks advance notice of field visits, and insisting that agencies supply internal data such as funding sources and staff personal details including residential addresses. "We cannot be in the area without a reason," said one NGO. "We used to work directly with communities but we can't anymore." Many NGOs that focus on sensitive sectors such as human rights and civic education have been subject to surveillance and harassment by government forces. "We have had visits at home from the government. Even working with traumatized populations is seen as political," another humanitarian agency told *RI*. In addition, some donors have refused to work with the former commercial farm communities because they were unwilling to "legitimize" the land reform program by providing services to new settlers. Their resistance to fund programs has also limited access to these populations.

Conclusions

The best way to rebuild trust between the government of Zimbabwe and the humanitarian community is for all actors involved to focus and adhere to humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality, non-discrimination and provision of assistance on the basis of need and work in coordination, aiming to provide at least the minimum requirements in food, nutrition, shelter, water and sanitation and health care.

Therefore, *Refugees International* recommends that:

The Government of Zimbabwe:

- Acknowledge that former farm workers are increasingly vulnerable and take steps to meet their basic needs, including allowing humanitarian agencies to provide direct assistance to them.
- Form mixed needs assessment teams with local NGOs to conduct visits and ascertain the exact levels of vulnerability of groups living in the former commercial farming areas.

- Provide access to land to former farm workers and others that, due to unemployment and increasing vulnerability, are unable to meet their subsistence needs.
- Invest in skills training and education for farm workers who have not been retained in the commercial agriculture sector in order to allow redeployment to other economic sectors.
- Improve living conditions in squatter camps and informal settlements that host considerable numbers of former farm workers. When available, land should be allocated to them and basic community services should be upgraded.

The Government of Zimbabwe and the United Nations:

- Undertake a joint comprehensive vulnerability assessment in the commercial farming areas, rural communal lands and informal settlements to ascertain the exact levels of vulnerability. Due to the distrust between the Government of Zimbabwe and the United Nations, it is also recommended that a neutral party, such as a local NGO, be included in the process of forming the assessment teams.
- Devise and implement a plan of action to strengthen vital community services, such as health clinics, water points and primary education facilities in areas affected by incoming groups of former farm workers.

Donor Community:

- Devote greater financial resources to the former commercial farm areas to address humanitarian needs. These resources should be allocated based exclusively on degree of vulnerability of beneficiaries.

Refugees International conducted an assessment of the situation for internally displaced former farm workers in Zimbabwe from June 9-19, 2004.