

A shaky grip on Zimbabwe's moral high ground

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A single powerful image dominates international coverage of Zimbabwe's mounting tragedy.

Against a backdrop of green lawns and flowerbeds, weather-beaten white farmers, wives and children by their side, confront an axe-wielding gang at the gate, led by a man whose nom de guerre is Hitler and egged on by a president who threatens to go to war with Britain.

Not in the frame, however, is the first casualty of the confrontation between Zimbabwe's white farmers and so-called veterans of the country's guerrilla war. He is an anonymous black policeman, killed by the squatters, whose death warranted no more than a sentence or two.

Back on the scene is an unrepentant Ian Smith, whose unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 set Rhodesia on the path to guerrilla war. Neither side emerged with clean hands. But it should not be forgotten that his government tortured black civilians, and bombed refugee camps. It fought to keep 7,000 white farmers on 35m acres and 500,000 black farmers confined to 40m acres. And Mr Smith protected white land claims with as much brutality and as little compassion as Robert Mugabe now challenges them.

Just before dawn on September 18, 1969 the homes and crops of Chief Rekayi Tangwenya and his followers were flattened by a bulldozer accompanied by nine police Land Rovers. Almost 500 cattle were subsequently impounded.

Although it was their ancestral home, in the eyes of the regime they were illegal squatters on land the law decreed was white. Five years later, the chief and his people were evicted.

No compensation was paid. Nor did Chief Tangwenya have the option of sanctuary in Britain or Australia. Instead he took to the hills, a proud old man defying attempts to arrest him, but not a subject for the international media. Like the chief, Zimbabwe's white farmers are a remarkable breed. Tough and resilient, and hospitable to journalists, their plight is dreadful, the tactics used to intimidate them outrageous. Many have made great efforts to improve the lot of their workers, and to be good neighbours to black farmers, and some were still at school when Mr Smith was in power. But they are part of a community with a chequered past.

It was the white farmers who helped bring Mr Smith to office in 1964. Their farmsteads became military outposts, and they fought for a party as ruthless in its determination to cling to power as Mr Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF.

At independence elections in 1980, they stayed loyal to Mr Smith, and along with most other whites voted for the Rhodesian Front under a constitution that set aside 20 seats for whites. Mr Mugabe nevertheless made a magnanimous victory speech, and to set white fears at rest, he appointed white ministers of agriculture and finance, and retained Mr Smith's white head of intelligence.

It was not enough for many of the farmers. In 1985, in the first elections after independence, 15 of the 20 seats reserved for whites were won by Mr Smith's party, with the backing of most white farmers. Today they support the Movement for Democratic Change opposition party, in what

some observers suggest may mark the dawn of a new non-racial democracy in Zimbabwe, but Mr Mugabe has not forgotten the past.

It seems that Britain, however, recalls it dimly, if at all. But the past is pertinent. During the 1970s when there were several attempts to end the guerrilla war, western governments attempted to reassure whites by proposing a trust fund, which among other things would guarantee compensation abroad if property rights were abused. At one stage this fund was to be as much as \$2bn, and Britain invited 25 countries to contribute.

As expected, land was a key issue at the 1979 Lancaster House constitutional conference on Zimbabwe. It came close to breakdown over the limitations the draft constitution placed on redistribution of land.

Mr Mugabe and fellow nationalist leader Joshua Nkomo asked for reassurances that land redistribution would not be made impossible by the combination of entrenched clauses and lack of funds.

After a meeting with UK and US officials, they issued a statement saying they accepted assurances that London and Washington and other governments would "assist in land, agricultural and economic development programmes... which go a long way in allaying the great concern we have over the whole land question".

That assurance is now downplayed by British officials. No figure, they say, was ever mentioned. They point out that Britain has provided some £44m (\$70m) for land resettlement since independence, and promises to provide more if conditions are right. But total international assistance has fallen well short of the \$2bn once envisaged, and donors refuse to put a figure to the amount that could be available.

Mr Mugabe has let them off the hook by mismanaging the economy and allocating farms to henchman and cronies, but the spirit, if not the letter, of Lancaster House has been broken.

Britain nevertheless seems convinced that it occupies the moral high ground. "You were once my hero - what went wrong?" Peter Hain, the former anti-apartheid campaigner, now foreign office minister for Africa, asked Mr Mugabe when they first met. Yet for most people who had admired the man, disillusionment goes back much earlier than the disputes and abuses of the past couple of years. It dates back to 1983 and 1984, when Zimbabwe's fifth brigade terrorised Matabeleland and slaughtered more than 1,000 civilians. But they were black, and Britain did nothing.

Mr Mugabe is destroying Zimbabwe by playing the land card in his search for a victory for his corrupt and discredited party in the promised elections. But whether the attention Zimbabwe is receiving is doing the country a service is open to doubt. News values are distorted, memories are short, many acts forgotten, and perspectives lacking.

Mr Mugabe has changed from reconciliator to autocrat, but there is more to his anger than is generally acknowledged, and more questions about Britain's role to be asked. A new generation, black and white, is challenging the old order, but the past is not another country.