

## NEWSLETTER FROM CATHY BUCKLE IN ZIMBABWE



### **Be warned. No more land invasions, except for...**

5 March 2021

Dear Family and Friends

Heading north east on the highway a few days after the easing of the latest Covid lockdown it was a joy to be able to see our beautiful Zimbabwe again. How I had missed her! Ahead of me a huge 30 tonne rig had stopped and the driver was buying a bowl of tomatoes from a little girl who wasn't even as tall as the tyres; the smile on her face at the sale of her tomatoes spoke a thousand words and made me smile too. All around the grey skies were low and ominous, more rain was coming, and the tops of the kopjes and mountains were shrouded in white rain clouds.

All along the road the rivers were full, up to their banks, lapping against tall grass, bulrushes and sedges. A single vervet monkey scampered across the road, stopping on the verge to pick up a morsel before disappearing into the tall flowering grass. Fat bellied cows were grazing in the lush grass and big pools of water lay in the dips and valleys, the ground everywhere saturated. How much we all need these glimpses of beauty to cope with the ugliness of Zimbabwe's never ending injustices which slap you in the face day after day.

How can it be, I keep asking myself, that twenty one years after I started writing these *Letters From Zimbabwe* I am still writing about land invasions and evictions? How long can this insecurity continue to ravage our Zimbabwe we all ask as the years tick past, the food imports continue and more and more people lose their livelihoods.

"Henceforth no more land invasions in whatever form, place, or by whomsoever! Be warned!" These were the words of President Mnangagwa's spokesman, George Charamba on the 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021 on Twitter. As we have many times before, we didn't hold our breath and waited to see if these were just platitudes again intended to charm "The West."

Just ten days after the "Be Warned" statement was made, two Statutory Instruments were gazetted, coming into force simultaneously on the 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2021 showing that the government was going ahead with plans for lucerne farming by Dendairy in a substantial area of communal land in Chiredzi. SI 50 of 2021 will see twelve thousand five hundred and thirty eight Shangaan families from Chiredzi South and East being forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to make way for white owned commercial farmers Dendairy.

Harare East MP Tendai Biti (MDC Alliance) asked Local Government deputy minister Marian Chombo to

explain why the Shangaan villagers' ancestral land was being offered to white farmers at the expense of minority groups. She responded by saying: "Right now, we are in the drive to boost our agriculture, and so if we realise that some of the land being occupied as residential areas is suitable for agriculture, we introduce those statutory instruments to make sure that we do justice."

Questioning the government's policy that was being used to take communal land, Justice minister Ziyambi Ziyambi said the project was of national interest: "Communal land is vested in the President, and even if you have land with title deeds, when there is a project of national interest, the President can cause it to be gazetted, and you will be relocated." National interest we asked? while activists started a vigorous social media campaign #BoycottDendairy to highlight the injustice.

So it was clear that the "Be Warned" statement didn't apply to the Zanu PF government evicting black Shangaan villagers to make way for white commercial farmer Coetzee who President Mnangagwa said he had "worked very well with" and admitted shielding the Coetzee's Kwekwe Dendairy farm owners from land reform because of their "good nature."

Meanwhile a report had been published in The Zimbabwe Independent about the land grab of Oscro Farm in Chiredzi by a named Zanu PF provincial official and a Chiredzi medical doctor. Protected by a BIPPA (Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement) between Zimbabwe and Italy, the 5,000 hectare ranch, purchased by Tony Sarpo in 1987, has 120 hectares planted to sugar cane and a herd of 200 Braham cattle.

The Zimbabwe Independent reported that in late January 2021 the provincial government official arrived at 7pm on a Friday night in two vehicles with five "machete wielding people" who informed the farm manager they had been hired to forcibly remove him. Any of us who have been the victims of land invasions in the last twenty one years had chills down our spines when we heard this, knowing only too well that there was nothing at all coincidental about the timing of the incident coming on a Friday night – when all the courts are closed for the weekend and legal relief is all but impossible. Was it also coincidental that a few days after the Zimbabwe Independent exposed the names of the Zanu PF "functionaries" involved in the Oscro farm invasion by men with machetes, the "Be Warned" statement was issued, by Zanu PF Presidential spokesman? The irony wasn't lost on us.

Coincidental or not, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021, America announced the renewal of targeted sanctions on around 140 entities and individuals in Zimbabwe. President Biden said: "actions and policies of certain members of the Government of Zimbabwe and other persons to undermine Zimbabwe's democratic processes or institutions continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the foreign policy of the United States."

At the end of it all, the sad reality in Zimbabwe in 2021 is that it doesn't matter if you are a Shangaan villager living on ancestral lands and the government gives your land to a white dairy farmer, you are in the same boat as the white commercial farmer on land protected by a BIPPA being invaded by government functionaries who want your land.

The tragedy however, is for all the rest of us ordinary people in Zimbabwe. We are now in the third decade of land grabs and evictions and while the invaders scabble for someone else's livelihood, legacy and history, the huge trucks plying our highways have to keep on coming in from South Africa in order to keep food in our bellies in the country once known as the Breadbasket of Africa.

Until next time, thanks for reading this Letter From Zimbabwe, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, and my books about life in Zimbabwe, a country in waiting,

Love Cathy

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