

Land beneficiary records in a shambles

NewsHawks by Bernard Mpfu

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THE ministry of Lands says beneficiaries of the land reform programme owe the government ZW\$145.4 million for the infrastructure they inherited on allocated land, but the Auditor-General says there is no database of such farmers and farm improvements.

The major highlight of Auditor-General Mildred Chiri's report for the financial year ending December 2019 on appropriation accounts and fund accounts is that Treasury incurred unauthorised excess expenditure amounting to ZW\$6.8 billion (see highlights).

The audit lays bare the government's shambolic record-keeping in the Agriculture ministry. The country embarked on a fast-track land reform programme at the turn of the millennium to address colonial ownership imbalances which came in the backdrop of mounting pressure from the country's freedom fighters.

Last year, the government announced that it would pay white farmers a whopping US\$3.5 billion as compensation for the losses incurred from the fast-track land reform programme of 2000. The agreement, termed the Global Compensation Deed, was entered into between the government and the Commercial Farmers' Union of Zimbabwe in July 2020.

According to the Auditor-General's 2019 released this week, the country's Agriculture ministry, which is in charge of food security, supplying throughput to the manufacturing sector and carrying out land redistribution, has over the years been mis-stating its financial records.

"Contrary to Section 35 (6) (a) of the Public Finance Management Act [Chapter 22:19], which requires the Accounting Officer to keep or cause to be kept proper records of account, there was no credible database for the beneficiaries of the land reform programme to support the outstanding revenue amount of \$145 404 199 disclosed in the outstanding revenue return," Chiri said in the report.

“I could not therefore, verify the accuracy and completeness of the return. Furthermore, some farms allocated to the beneficiaries had not been valued by the valuation section of the Department to ascertain the value payable by the farmer for farm improvements such as dams, barns, farm buildings and access roads, implying that outstanding revenue may have been mis-stated. The outstanding revenue return might be materially mis-stated in the absence of completeness of revenue records.”

The Department of Land Resettlement and Security of Tenure, Chiri added, should come up with a comprehensive consolidated database for beneficiaries of land reform which should form the basis of revenue computation in compliance with Section 35 (6) (a) of the Public Finance Management Act [Chapter 22:19].

In response, officials from the ministry said valuation of the farms acquired during the land reform programme would be finalised once the government completes its land audit.

“The observation is noted. The database for A2 allocations is available but changes happen as some offer letters are withdrawn and others downsized. The Zimbabwe Land Commission is doing a comprehensive land audit which will give us the final data for the uploading of the information onto the database. Phase 1 of the land audit has been done and the Zimbabwe Lands Commission will provide the Department with the details to upload onto the database, the ministry responded.”

“The Department has no Accountants at District levels so as to reach all farmers. Accountants from Head Office and Provincial Offices do revenue collection trips in Districts as and when the resources are available. Most farms have been valued, however, the process is ongoing as there are reports that need to be produced and Compensation Committee meetings will be held to determine values for billing purposes.”

Commenting on the response of the ministry officials, Chiri said: “The database for A2 farmers referred to was not availed to audit.”

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