



Could SA end up like Zimbabwe?

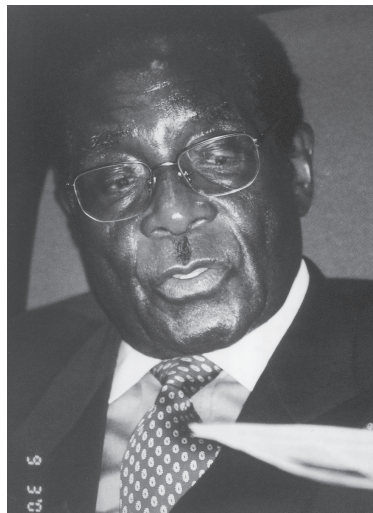
*Since the land grabs in Zimbabwe, many have asked if they could happen in SA. **Geoff Hill** argues that those South Africans who are not sure where the country is heading are looking in the wrong place for the answers.*

Over the past two years, I've been researching a book on Zimbabwe and the question most people ask me is: Will what has happened there be repeated in South Africa?

Then, they talk about the land invasions, but the search for answers doesn't start there. I would start at Johannesburg's Park Station where the long-haul buses pull in from all over the country, each one packed with young men and women from the rural areas, coming to the city in search of a better life. The problem is so bad that, if the rate of migration to cities like Jo'burg and Durban is not stemmed, city life (including jobs, water, housing and general wellbeing) will not keep pace with the surge in population.

That's where Zimbabwe's problem began. From independence in 1980 to the start of the farm invasions in 1999, the country's population almost doubled, but the number of people living in Harare jumped five-fold. Zimbabwe is not alone. The movement of people from rural areas to the towns is just as severe in Thailand, Philippines, Kenya and Brazil and in each case the typical migrant is aged between 18 and 30, educated and unemployed.

Studies by the United Nations and others have shown that when you



educate people in the countryside, they invariably want to move to the cities.

One report suggested that, after three years of primary school, a person was twice as likely to seek work in the city as someone with no education. After three years at high school, the ratio doubled again to four times.

But where does that leave South Africa? Since 1994, this country has shed more than 500 000 jobs and unemployment is a major headache for the government. John Ngcobo is a social worker in one of the sprawling townships near Durban. He sees the problem first hand, and what is

happening in Durban mirrors Park Station.

'It is massive beyond comprehension,' he says. 'Every day more people arrive by bus from rural KwaZulu-Natal and already there are thousands in the township with no jobs. But the new arrivals are smart young people, keen to work, and they are desperate.'

Ngcobo says the tragedy is that South Africa has a skilled workforce and competitive wage rates. 'But, there are not enough jobs to go around and the situation is getting worse. This is what leads to gangs, crime, prostitution and

other social ills and it is perhaps the biggest challenge facing our nation.'

In Zimbabwe, it was the urban poor, living six – or more – to a room, who led the revolt against Mugabe and their gripe, was not land, but money and jobs. In 1998, when they took to the streets and threatened to vote out the ruling party at the next election, the government tried to distract them with the land, but no one was listening and opposition grew because the real complaint had not been addressed.

Without question, there are rural communities in South Africa who need and deserve land and the government should make sure they get it through legal means. But that will not prevent a revolution. If you give land to families now, how many of their children will stay home and grow crops once they leave school? Experience in the rest of Africa suggests that those kids will head for the cities and try to put their education to work.

So what are the choices? If educated people drift to the towns then one option would be to close the rural schools and stunt the mental growth of a generation, but that would be unforgivable. The other would be to accept the fact that South Africa is rapidly becoming an urban nation, full of skilled, hard-working young people who deserve the right to build themselves a better future.

At independence in 1980, the literacy rate in Rhodesia was already an impressive 70% whereas in many parts of South Africa, less than half the population could read and write. Mugabe performed a miracle and, within 15 years, he had raised literacy to 95% and in that context, he remains one of my heroes. But nothing was done to cater for the demands of an educated workforce. The new generation would rather be on the Internet than on the land. And if land was the issue then

why, when it is there for the taking, have 2-million black Zimbabweans decamped to South Africa and some 600 000 to the UK? But small-scale agriculture would never give them the income needed for clothes, school fees, cellphones, TVs and the myriad of goods that are part of Africa's new culture.

So what are the options?

Giving people land will not keep them at home, but if they can find jobs in their own communities, there's a good chance they will not migrate to the city. South

Africa needs to put all its effort into industrial growth and developing the rural areas where unemployment is the highest.

Ironically, the South African government's unwillingness to get tough with Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe, is adding to this country's unemployment problems. There are no hard figures but reports suggest that somewhere around 2-million black Zimbabweans now live in South Africa and, on some days, as many as 1 500 or more slip across the Limpopo.

Black Zimbabweans began fleeing

Zimbabwean unions caught between old alliances?

*Unions in Zimbabwe are caught between their old allegiance to Zanu-PF and their desire to now see the overthrow of president Robert Mugabe. The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to ZCTU president **Lovemore Matombo** about the dilemma the labour movement faces in Zimbabwe and their relationship with the MDC.*

The bottom-line for the leadership of the Zimbabwean Council of Trade Unions (ZCTU) is to get rid of their current president, Robert Mugabe. However, they acknowledge that after that it is not clear what the situation will be for workers. ZCTU president Lovemore Matombo says, 'our situation is complex'. In terms of the ideological position of the working class, 'we stand alone'. That is largely a result of the fact that the MDC (despite the origins of its leader MDC president, Morgan Tsvangirai who hailed from the ZCTU) does not align itself with organised labour. Matombo says 'the way we know it, the MDC is a heterogeneous party. It has no official ideology at the moment despite the fact that it is supported by many business people while it also seeks a relationship with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank'. The MDC is more of a conservative party, he says, hence 'we cannot go into an alliance with a right wing party'. However, if there are areas we agree on we will share views, he says. He is clear however, that if the MDC gets into power there is a likelihood that it will turn against workers. This is despite the fact that ...came from the labour movement.' He is now enthralled by capital', Matombo says.

The Mugabe system represents the old and Zimbabwe is now seeking a new order in which there is a democracy. 'It is clear that the government has failed. This is illustrated by the clamp down on the media and other oppressive measures and the shortage of commodities and the general state of the economy,' Matombo says. 'How long it will go on will depend on pressure which civil society can exert on Zanu-PF'. But herein lies a key problem, he says, because civil society is generally quite weak aside from organised labour.



the country in 1982 when Mugabe sent troops to the southern province of Matabeleland to snuff out opposition. A report from the Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace estimates that somewhere between 8 000 and 40 000 people were murdered, but others moved to South Africa and have never gone back.

The recent flood of migrants began in 1999 when Mugabe embarked on a coercive land-reform programme and cracked down on opposition which looked poised to win power in the 2000 elections. That poll and the presidential election last year were marred by intimidation and vote rigging and, as investors withdrew and the economy shrunk unemployed workers and their families headed for Beit Bridge.

The question South Africans should be asking is: once there is democratic change across the border, will the exiles go home?

Ketius Ndhlovu (32) came to Gauteng from Bulawayo when the new wave of political violence started in 1999. 'At first it was a temporary move,' he says, 'and for the first six months I sold goods on the side of the road in Pretoria. At that time I was sharing a shack with five other guys,

but then I got a job at a tyre shop. Now my wife is here and our two kids are at primary school and my wife's brother and my parents will be joining us by January. We are starting to feel settled and I think it would be hard to move everyone back to Zimbabwe, even if things came right.'

South African home affairs minister, Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose portfolio includes immigration, believes that

the exiles from neighbouring states pose a major problem.

'We have a high rate of unemployment and there are not enough jobs for South Africans,' he says. 'Every year more of our own people graduate from colleges and high school and we cannot afford for the jobs we have to be taken by illegal immigrants. If people are here illegally and we can round them up, we do it, but, to think that we will ever control the problem is a dream.'

However, he is optimistic that if conditions in Zimbabwe improved, at least the flow of new migrants would be slowed. But to reverse the trend, Clare Short, the former British minister for international development, believes it would take more than just the establishment of democratic government in Harare. (Short resigned after the Iraqi war, alleging that Tony Blair had exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, but she maintains a special interest in Zimbabwe.)

'I think it would be relatively simple to rebuild the country once the political problems have been sorted out,' she says. 'The whole world will have to come to the rescue and I believe they would.' But, she says, the high level of

education among Zimbabwean exiles could work against reversing the brain drain because so many of them have found jobs in their new countries.

There would be some who would go home because of family ties and it might be possible to set up an incentive scheme to encourage people to come back. The real challenge will be to create jobs both for returning exiles and the millions of people who are unemployed.

But even then, Ketius Ndhlovu says he might not go home. 'I would need to feel sure that a new Zimbabwe would not only be better for me, but that it will still be good in ten years time when my children have finished their education. For now, I would rather stay here and build a new life with my family.'

And it's not just exiles from Zimbabwe who are burdening the South African economy. Walk through a flea market (or even a building site) and you'll find people working there who hail from Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia, Malawi and even West Africa.

Like the internal migrants who come to town from South Africa's rural areas, few, if any, of the foreign workers are willing to settle in the countryside or even in small towns. Instead, they head for bigger cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban etc.

If ever the ANC's power is questioned, the challenge will come not from the rural areas but from the swelling ranks of the urban unemployed living in poverty around the country's biggest cities and, as in Zimbabwe, land will not be the issue.

You can see that at Park Station.

LB

Hill is Southern Africa correspondent for a daily newspaper in Washington DC. His book, 'Battle for Zimbabwe' was published in October 2003.