

Stateless former farm workers in Zimbabwe

Katinka Ridderbos

Several hundred thousand people of foreign ancestry who used to work on white-owned commercial farms in Zimbabwe are stateless, jobless and either displaced or at risk of displacement.

Xenophobic government policies designed to drive out farm owners and undermine the political opposition have left large numbers of farm workers with nowhere to go.

By 2000, Zimbabwe's President Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party were facing, for the first time since independence in 1980, significant political opposition. With a crucial presidential election coming up in 2002, ZANU-PF responded by announcing a fast-track land reform programme, which provided for the forcible acquisition of (mostly white-owned) commercial farms.

The government also brought in the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2001. This Act introduced a prohibition on dual citizenship, so that people with dual nationality would automatically lose their Zimbabwean citizenship unless they renounced their foreign citizenship. The Act's main aim was to disenfranchise the estimated 30,000 white Zimbabweans, many of whom held British passports and who were accused by ZANU-PF of using their dual citizenship to discredit the ZANU-PF regime abroad and of bankrolling the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). People who opposed – or were thought to oppose – ZANU-PF's rule were seen as enemies of the state who had no legitimate claim to Zimbabwean citizenship.

These measures affected not only white Zimbabweans but also hundreds of thousands of farm workers, including in particular the many farm workers who were of foreign descent. This was no accident; farm workers were perceived to be under the sway of their (white) employers, themselves seen as MDC supporters. As a result, farm workers were thought to be

as much of a threat to ZANU-PF as the white farmers themselves.

In January 2000, prior to the start of the fast-track land reform programme, an estimated two million farm workers, seasonal workers and their families lived and worked on the commercial farms.¹ Of these, an estimated one million people (200,000 farm workers and their families) are thought to have lost their homes and their jobs as a direct consequence of the land reform programme.

About 30% of the original two million farm workers and their families were of foreign descent. These were mostly second- or third-generation immigrants whose parents or grandparents had moved to Zimbabwe (or the former Rhodesia prior to independence in 1980) as migrant labourers from Malawi, Zambia or Mozambique. Prior to the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act, many of these 'foreign' farm workers had been entitled to Zimbabwean nationality under the country's Constitution and the Citizenship of Zimbabwe Act. Indeed, many of them had lived in Zimbabwe their entire lives and had no formal links with the countries of their ancestral origin.

Nevertheless, as a result mainly of bureaucratic obstacles and high levels of illiteracy among these 'foreign' farm workers, few had ever acquired Zimbabwean citizenship documents, or even any identity documents such as birth certificates. The Citizenship Amendment Act left many of them at risk of statelessness. While the Zimbabwean authorities treated them as if they were in possession of a second nationality, the countries of their supposed foreign citizenship did not in fact regard them as citizens. Other 'foreign' farm workers were



simply not aware that they had to renounce the foreign nationality to which they may have been entitled due to their foreign ancestry. Even if they knew, the administrative burdens of the process of renouncing it often posed too great an obstacle.

At the same time, because their ancestors came from outside Zimbabwe, when these workers lost their homes on the commercial farms they had no ancestral homes in Zimbabwe to which they could return. As a result, many farm workers of foreign descent are stuck: they continue to live on the farms where they used to be employed but, with their former employers having been driven off the land, they are essentially squatting in their own homes and are at constant risk of forcible displacement by the new farm owners. They are among the most vulnerable people in Zimbabwe today, without livelihoods, with little or no access to social services, and with no support structures to fall back on.

Katinka Ridderbos (katinka.ridderbos@nrc.ch) is Country Analyst (Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe) at IDMC (<http://www.internal-displacement.org>).

1. IDMC, 'The Many Faces of Displacement: IDPs in Zimbabwe', August 2008 www.internal-displacement.org/countries/Zimbabwe, p32.

40-page special FMR issue on 'Ten Years of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement' available in English, Arabic, French and Spanish. For hard copies, please email fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk.



Online at: <http://www.fmreview.org/GuidingPrinciples10.htm>