

MUGABE POISED

White farmers 'must sell' land

ZIMBABWE: Declining popularity in the opinion polls is one reason why the government led by Robert Mugabe, pictured right, is threatening to change the land law.

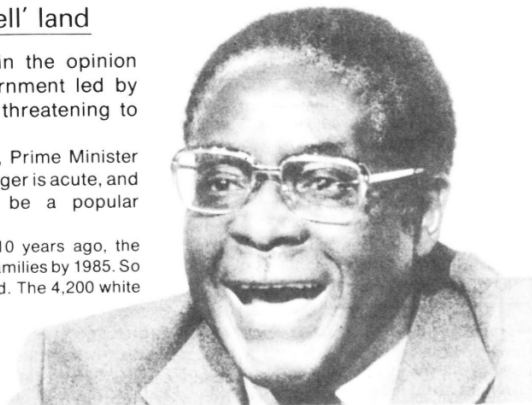
With elections coming up next year, Prime Minister Mugabe needs a vote winner. Land Hunger is acute, and expropriating white farmers would be a popular measure.

When Mr Mugabe took power nearly 10 years ago, the government promised to resettle 162,000 families by 1985. So far, only 52,000 families have received land. The 4,200 white farmers still own one-third of the country's land.

That is why Mr Mugabe has told the commercial farmers to make more land available for peasants, or face the possibility of compulsory acquisition – which would mean abandoning the “willing-seller, willing-buyer” formula that was written into the Constitution during the independence talks with Britain.

Observers say the only surprise is that it has taken so long for the expropriation threat to be posed in a serious way. One of them, Tony Hawkins, writing in the *London Financial Times* (Sept. 9), notes a serious flaw in the resettlement programme:

“It is a once-off operation. It might be possible to find enough land to satisfy the present generation. But with the population growing at 2.9% annually, land hunger will soon revive (unless the spread of Aids in Zimbabwe takes a dramatic toll, as some doctors fear).”



Poll Tax confusion

LONDON: Confusion reigns over the Labour Party's plans to abolish the Poll Tax, which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has introduced in place of the property tax. Labour, which now leads the Conservatives in the opinion polls, has promised to reintroduce the property tax.

But their parliamentary spokesman, David Blunkett, claims the tax would be related to ability to pay. He says: “People will not have to pay more if they live in areas of high house prices. High cost areas will not be hit disproportionately.”

Observers have noted that, on the ability-to-pay principle, people in expensive residential areas ought to pay more than others.

Activists have complained that they do not fully understand what their party is proposing.

The plan is to link a local income tax with the reintroduction of the property tax, but no details are yet available.

BOOT FOR PREMIER IN LAND ROW

BELIZE: American land speculators have upset the citizens of this former British colony. So at recent elections, they ditched the pro-US government.

Back in power is George Price, 70, who led the tiny Central American country to independence in 1981.

He had accused the former Prime Minister, Manuel Esquivel, of selling vast tracts of land at knock-down prices to foreign ranchers and tourist interests, including Texans and the Coca-Cola company.

—Paris at a price!—

PARIS: Beggars have learnt the price of a patch on the Champs Elysees: they have to pay up to £1,500 (\$2,300) for choice sites on the famous street. The money is collected by an “underground” organisation of criminals who know how to calculate the rental values of key locations where the beggars can make most money from passing Parisians.