

ZIMBABWE FORUM

David Domke



Dr. Nibaldo Aguilera

In many African nations that have only recently begun to extricate themselves from the shackles of colonial rule, and most of those after long periods of struggle, the problems of land reform and distribution are only now being addressed. Lifting themselves up after centuries of foreign domination and exploitation,

the indigenous populations of those countries are demanding equal share in land ownership and equal access to the political structures of their governments and economies

In Zimbabwe, much of the anger and frustration have been expressed in acts of violence against white farm owners, who until recently owned most of the farms in that country. The forceful repossession of many farms by native Zimbabweans caught the attention of the world wide press, but the underlying dynamics of the centuries-old problems of

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land ownership went largely unnoticed.

This Fall, the School hosted a *Friday Evening Forum* on Zimbabwe, given by Henry George School Trustee Dr. Nibaldo Aguilera. Dr. Aguilera has a wide background in social and political-economic studies and is also head of the Social Studies Department at The College of New Rochelle's Manhattan campus. In addition, Dr. Aguilera was invited by the University of Zimbabwe to visit that country, a trip he undertook in the Summer of 2000.

Dr. Aguilera began his presentation by giving a history of Zimbabwe, formerly known in the modern era as Rhodesia. The country, which became known world wide in 1854, thanks to the British missionary Dr. Livingston, has had a long history of encounters with European colonial powers, dating back to 1513. By the late 19th Century, British colonial rule became solidified under the auspices of Cecil Rhodes, after whom it was then named.

From the 1960s to 1979 the people of Zimbabwe engaged in a long guerilla war with the occupying British-backed Rhodesian forces. The people's forces were headed by the ZANU-PF (Zimbabwean Africa National United- Patriotic Front), a coalition of fighters consisting of Shona and Ndebele warriors, and other political factions. The leader of the Patriot Front was Robert Mugabe, a former school teacher. In 1980, the British granted Zimbabwe formal independence but, as Dr. Aguilera pointed out, many of the problems created by colonial rule trouble the coun-

try to this day. Mugabe was elected President of the country and under his rule Zimbabwe made great strides. Being a former school teacher, one of Mugabe's first priorities was an enhancement of public education; today Zimbabwe, with a population of 12 million, has one of the best education systems in Africa. Also, under his rule, unemployment dropped from 50 to 40%. Still, the country is faced with grave problems.

One of the conditions negotiated with Britain during the granting of independence was the return of the land to the people of Zimba-

powers-that-be throughout the world," paid only lip-service to the land problem.

"It is typical of land reform historically that when land is redistributed, the peasants most often get the worst land"

Frustrated by years of neglect by the international community, Mugabe in the late 90s formed a new constitution which legitimated the repossession of the farms owned by non-Zimbabweans. The international media focused almost exclusively on the violence that resulted from repossession and did little to bring to light the dynamics of the struggle of Zimbabweans for ownership of their own land. "Subsequently," Dr. Aguilera pointed out, "Britain and the United States condemned Mugabe and his government, cutting off financial aid. As a result of this, Mugabe is now isolated and is considered a pariah in the international community."

This isolation has further deepened Zimbabwe's financial crisis. Indeed, a recent article in Britain's *Financial Times* reports that the Mugabe government has promised a doubling of public spending and tax cuts totalling \$400 million dollars over the next year. As Mugabe is up for reelection in a few months, this is perceived by many economists as an "electioneering budget," according to the *Financial Times*. It describes Zimbabwe's financial minister, Sima Makoni, as "shrugging off concerns over deepening recession, a depreciating currency and escalating inflation," as he prepares next years budget. "Once the election

is out of the way, we will see the real budget," the *Times* article quotes one economist as saying, add-

ing that Mr. Makoni's proposals "reflect a growing desperation within the government."

Dr. Aguilera summed up his remarks by making a forceful proposal, "the only real way out," for the country of Zimbabwe. Citing the historical evidence, he noted "the land ques-



bwe. Britain however lacked the commitment to this reform, and most of the productive farm land lay in the hands of white farm owners. Dr. Aguilera succinctly summed up this critical situation: "The reconciliation of land and people never took place; white land owner apartheid, in many ways worse than it had been in South Africa, remained until recently."

Dr. Aguilera continued, "in addition to the land that remained in the hands of white farm owners living in Zimbabwe, 35 to 40% of the land was owned by absentee land-

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owners." According to Dr. Aguilera, Mugabe continually pleaded with the UN to remedy this situation "to restore justice to Zimbabwe by clearing up the problems of land ownership and the ongoing colonial legacy that still gripped the country's economy." The UN, which "often represents the interests of the

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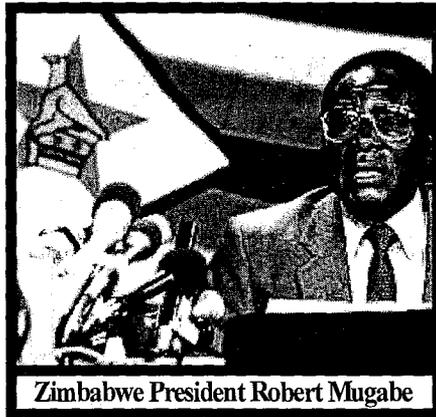
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tion is behind the redevelopment problems of most countries undertaking the struggle to throw off the yoke of colonial legacy." He further pointed out that "mere land reform itself is not the solution" and that the only real solution will come about "when land rent becomes a part of society" through its appropriation by the whole community. "It is typical of land reform historically that when land is redistributed, the peasants most often get the worst land" on which to work and eke out a living. The result



Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe

"How ridiculous is it that they have to pay to work the land?"

of that is that the peasants become sharecroppers on their own land. "How ridiculous is it that they must pay to work the land," Dr. Aguilera asked. He added that this would also solve the problem of absentee ownership. "The absentee landowners would rush to the country in order to make the land they own more productive, in order to pay the land rent." Indeed, 200 of the farms in Zimbabwe remain unoccupied.

Dr. Aguilera further noted that he does not believe that Mugabe lacks the political will to make such a radical reform. "He only lacks the knowledge of how to go about initiating a lasting reform that would truly solve that nation's economic crisis." Dr. Aguilera hopes to return to Zimbabwe and "acquaint Mr. Mugabe" with the ideas behind true land reform.