

GROPINGS TOWARDS LAND REFORM

LAND REFORM in Ethiopia has come to grief, reports *The Scotsman* in an article, September 3. It appears that in the past, the Ethiopian Government taxed a man on the amount of land he owned, not on the amount of money he made. The new law authorised the Government to assess the production of a piece of land and to tax the owner a percentage of his income. This, says *The Scotsman*, has led to strong resistance from the peasants of Gojam Province north of Addis Ababa who took up arms against the assessors. Troops were called in and after much bloodshed the uprising was put down, and the soldiers are still there.

Says the article: "Embarrassed officials of the Ministry of Land Reform want to play down the association of land reform with the incident. They say that the new tax legislation came from the Ministry of Finance, not their Ministry. In fact, they insist, the legislation never had their approval.

"The distinction makes little impression on Ethiopians who know about the incident. In their view, the Government as a whole acted on land reform through taxation and ran into enormous trouble and bloodshed. The trouble diminishes the chance for more basic reforms later."

Ethiopia's programme of "land reform" is in theory intended to break up feudalism, and give peasants the incentive to grow more food.

"Unlike the rest of Africa," says *The Scotsman*, "Ethiopia has traditions of land ownership and use that make it somewhat like the feudal states of medieval Europe.

"Researchers estimate that 85 per cent of the country's twenty-three million people are farmers, with only thirty per cent owning their own land. Most Ethiopian farmers are tenants on other people's land, and the bulk of them pay their rental by turning over a large share of their crop to the landlord.

"Some specialists believe that Ethiopia has the potential to become the granary of East Africa, but it is hard to persuade a peasant to increase his production when he knows a good deal of that increase will go to his landlord."

Now the Ministry of Land Reform have proposed a four point programme for the years ahead.

"First they want to regulate the agreement between landlords and their tenant farmers. They are preparing legislation that would require written contracts; allow the landlord no more than thirty per cent of production; set a limit on cash rents, encourage payments in cash

rather than crops; abolish all personal services by tenants for their landlords; and forbid eviction from land without a Government hearing.

"Second, the Ministry want to measure and register all land in the country.

"Third, the Ministry want to impose prohibitive taxes on land that is unused, forcing some large landowners either to sell their holdings or put them in production.

"Finally, the Ministry want a re-settlement programme under which Government land would be distributed to landless peasants."

Parliament is now to consider legislation covering the first two steps of the programme.

"If the legislation passes, it hardly represents a breathtaking and breakneck pace of land reform. Parliament considered similar legislation three years ago, watering it down so that it only dealt with the most archaic and minor forms of Ethiopian feudalism. By passing it now, Parliament will only be doing what it should have done three years ago."

The sentence "the Government as a whole acted on land reform through taxation" is apt to be misleading, since it implies the taxation of land whereas in fact it is production that is being taxed (the antithesis of land-value taxation).

So far as the four points of future land reform are concerned, we cannot quarrel with prohibitive taxes on unused land, although they ought to be part of taxes on all land, nor can we but approve of a register of all land in the country. However, the distribution of land to the peasants without land-value taxation (and corresponding relief of other taxes) is only making for future problems.

As for the limitation of rents to one third of production, this deserves the comment of *The Scotsman* that it hardly represents a breathtaking and breakneck pace of land reform.

The Publishers announce with regret the resignation of Mr. Richard Grinham, assistant editor since 1964, who is leaving to take up another post; he will, however, continue to help in a voluntary capacity. Readers will join us in wishing him every success in the future.