



... World Briefs...

MEXICO CITY Rural War

At least 40 people have died this year in rural disturbances which are rooted in land disputes. New para military groups are emerging to fight for economic justice in the face of the failure of the Mexican government's attempts to deal with the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas. Observers claim that, in addition to violence over land, social discontent is aggravated by corrupt and undemocratic local government.

Indigenous Indians are sympathetic to the Zapatistas, and the government is treating this opposition as favouring guerrilla activity. The Zapatista recently formed a political movement, the National Liberation Front, and they say that Mexico is "on the verge of civil war".

BEIRA Land grab: 1

Mozambique is now governed by a once-Marxist party which fought a civil war against the Portuguese. The anti-colonial insurrection was driven by the demand for land by the peasants. But now that Frelimo is the legitimate government, its ideology has changed. There has been a land rush by foreign and local developers, and the government has granted large concessions of land to party leaders.

Mozambique is ranked by the World Bank as the poorest country in the world. But only 10% of its 20m hectares of arable land is being cultivated. About 2.5m peasant families - 80% of the population - are squeezed onto that small area. But the government now wants to displace some of them to make room for developers.

According to Joao Ferreira, a Frelimo MP and former agriculture minister: "Why should we reserve 20m hectares for poor people who don't even pay taxes?"

NAIROBI Land grab: 2

THE MAU MAU was the terrorist army that fought the British colonial power in Kenya. The right to land was the inspiration that drove the liberation army, but many peasants are now wondering what they achieved with political independence. For the country is being swept by a phenomenon called 'land grabbing'. According to Greg Barrow, writing in *The Guardian* (London): the strict monitoring of the money supply by the IMF has meant that "land has become the last remaining gift that can be used to win political support from powerful individuals".

The government has been handing over land to political friends and property developers by first ejecting slum dwellers who have nowhere else to go. "We fought for independence and won our Uhuru [freedom], but we didn't win our land," according to a spokesman for the national council for non-governmental organisations.

Traffic islands, cemeteries, and even public toilets, have been appropriated and handed over to the land-grabbers, according to Kenyan press reports.

EL SALVADOR Price of freedom

UN peace-keepers are about to pull out from the country that experienced one of the bloodiest peasant wars in Latin America in the post-war years. But the peace accord of 1992 has not resolved the problems that provoked the violence in the first place.

Peasants who took over abandoned land were allowed to buy it on long-term credit. But the landowner, not the government, was allowed to set the price. And according to one UN official, some owners were asking for ten times the market price. The UN, which departs in December, fears that land-

owners may try to evict the peasant tillers, and is calling on the government to extend the right of tenure until sales are completed.

Eighty thousand people died in the civil war over land.

LONDON Pay-back time

Privatisation may be a hot political potato in the forthcoming general election as more evidence emerges of strange deals struck by John Major's government in the sale of public assets. Behind the underpricing of state enterprises has been the sale of land at knock-down prices in many of the major sell-off deals.

One forthcoming bonanza: the government has invited bidders to buy the Social Security offices which are situated on prime sites in Britain's cities. These have been provisionally valued at about £400m - half the Treasury's original estimate. Two of the contenders for the dole offices are shortlisted to buy fifty eight thousand Ministry of Defence homes which are due to be sold for about £1.6bn.

According to an investigation by *The Observer*, a London Sunday newspaper, a secretive group of donors to Tory Party funds is behind the purchase of some of these public assets.

● Vacant government buildings are costing tax payers over £130m a year in lost rents and rates. Despite this, the Treasury is planning to move into temporary offices owned by a property company while its own building is renovated and partly hived off as a hotel. This means Britain's taxpayers will pay an estimated £10m to the property company in rents over a three year period while nearby government buildings remain empty.

MACAO Jesuit dispute

A dispute over valuable land in this Portuguese colony on the

Chinese mainland has divided Catholics. At the centre of the dispute is the Jesuit-run school which occupies valuable land in the centre of the old city. The school stands opposite one of the most popular tourist attractions, the ruins of St. Paul's, a Baroque cathedral built in the 17th century.

The Society of Jesus, which runs the school, wants to remove the school's 79 year old headmaster. He is resisting retirement, claiming: "They want to sell our land. It is worth millions. This whole thing is a conspiracy. They are jealous and greedy".

The Society's spokesman denies planning to sell the £1m site, and replies that the headmaster and his supporters have engaged in property speculation by buying a house in Portugal.

NEW YORK Cyberspace grab!

Microsoft, the company that produces the Windows computer software, has been accused of unfair practice in the pricing of its lower cost Workstation version. This limits the number of simultaneous Internet connections to ten, making it unusable as a Web platform for cyberspace surfers. This means that potential online publishers will have to spend an extra \$500 to buy the Server version. According to publisher Tim O'Reilly: "I believe that Microsoft's position amounts to nothing more than a 'land grab' in the uncharted territory of the Internet".

LONDON

A CHELSEA garage that is too small to take a Rolls-Royce has been sold for £40,000. This exceeds by £2,000 the price paid for a broom cupboard opposite Harrods nine years ago.