



PHOTO: SCOOP MEDIA

Zimbabwe is in turmoil. Years of mismanagement under a despotic ruler have ruined the economy and destroyed agriculture. DYLAN QUINNELL reports on the experiences of some Zimbabwean farmers forced to flee their homeland.

It was after the Canadian farmer had been missing for a few days that his neighbours became concerned.

His family, in Harare for safety, were rung and when it was found he had not joined them, a search party was sent to look for him. Later, they found what was left of him.

Tied to a lonely tree under the bright Zimbabwean sun, he had been forced to drink sulphuric acid.

Such brutality is not unique in a country literally tearing itself apart.

The lucky ones are those like Althea Human who manage to get out alive. An estimated 4000 people are crossing the border to South Africa every day.

Althea sits across from me. A pretty, brown-haired girl with haunted eyes, she was born in Harare in 1984.

"I had a great childhood growing up on the farm doing all sorts of crazy things," she says.

Her brother Marius is still in Zimbabwe, refusing to leave the only home he's ever known. He painted a bleak picture, finally responding to his sister's emails: "I live in Zim, there is no zesa (electricity) and when we have zesa there is no net to mail."

Marius says power is running for only 10 to 15 hours a week, water runs once every two days, and you can watch the price of bread rise while waiting in a queue to buy it.

Once known as the bread basket of Africa, Zimbabwe is bordering on mass starvation after a 95 per cent crop failure. Supplies of staples such as maize meal are running low.

If food can be found, it takes bags full of money to buy even a loaf of bread, due to hyper-inflation. The black market value of Z\$1million is US\$5.50.

Many importers can no longer afford to do business, meaning even less food on shelves.

In June, President Robert Mugabe accused businesses of raising prices in an attempt to destabilise the economy.

To punish them, Mugabe ludicrously ordered all prices to be cut in half.

Retailers who ignored the direction could be imprisoned and Mugabe threatened to nationalise factories stopping production, even when there wasn't the manpower to run them.

"We are saying to all factory owners 'You must produce,'" said Mugabe. "If you don't produce, we certainly will seize the factories."

The *New Zealand Herald* reported that one Zimbabwean landlord now asks tenants to pay him in sugar, oil, flour and salt ... "instead of giving me cash, which loses value while I hold it," Norah Mutasa told the paper.

The story of Zimbabwe's fall from grace is complicated. Once called Rhodesia, after British imperialist and businessman Cecil Rhodes, it came under partial British rule in 1888.

Like much of Africa, Zimbabwean society is built on colonialism and vast inequality between black Africans and their European masters.

This led to years of guerrilla war during which the young hero Robert Mugabe, a leader of one of the patriotic movements, was first noticed.

In 1978 a power-sharing deal was brokered with the white government of Prime Minister Ian Smith whose regime was near collapse after years of war and foreign sanctions. The deal gave Zimbabwe its first black Prime Minister, Bishop Abel Muzorewa.

The power was still not fully in the hands of the majority, however, and the guerrilla war continued until a mediated peace two years later.

In the free elections of February 1980, Mugabe and his Zimbabwean African National Union party, ZANU, won a landslide victory. He has won reelection ever since, and plans to stand again next year.

But the validity of most of the elections, especially in 2002, has been questioned by international organisations after reports of intimidation and opposition votes being destroyed.

At first Mugabe's rule seemed nothing more than nationalistic, but it was soon understood that he had a vendetta against white Zimbabweans.

"In the beginning Mugabe wanted to negotiate. He said 'give us two farms and teach the black people how to run them,'" says Althea.

She lived on a massive plantation made up of various farms put together, "one cattle, one coffee, one sheep and macadamias". It covered 3000 ha and employed around 1500 workers.

"So originally the whites were like, 'Okay we'll give a certain amount'.

"Then Mugabe said no. He wanted more, saying give us four farms and you have one.

"So the whites said 'no, we've been on these farms for centuries. My great great grandfather was one of the voortrekkers who went up and got deeds in 1903'."

In 2000, after the farmers stood their ground, things got nasty.

Gangs of "war vets" made up of mostly 18 to 21-year-olds would roam the countryside and attack the people who worked for white farmers.

Mugabe had promised to pay them and look after their families.

"Some were younger than I was. They weren't even sperm at the time of

the independence war," say Althea.

At first the war vets were in relatively small groups, armed with sticks.

They were often beaten off by farm workers, each of whom had something to defend – a hut on the property for his family with toilets and electricity.

But soon the war vets were bussed into areas in larger numbers armed with AK-47s. Those resisting were shot.

Black workers fled to the outskirts of the big cities, setting up vast shanty towns like Chitungwiza.

It was those towns that Mugabe bulldozed in June 2005, claiming they were illegal housing.

In reality he was trying to destroy support for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change party, MDC.

In the meantime, farms fell into disarray. If white farmers still refused to leave, Mugabe's thugs turned up at their homes.

"Like Martin [a neighbour], they came to his house, killed his dogs and burnt him alive in the house. He had sent his family to Harare," says Althea, as if death was no longer shocking.

And so the defence began. Farms were turned into fortresses defended by people who had grown up hunting.

"My dad and two brothers would take turns, like at war, and sit up at night, when the blacks would come and take shots at the house.

"I remember one holiday we went home from boarding school and saw 500 of them surrounding the house.

"It was so scary, the dogs were going mental so they threw stuff at the dogs to kill them. We started shooting to scare them, get them to run off."

Visiting a friend in Chinoyi she found herself hiding in the roof as 40 people burned and ransacked cars outside, before coming inside

"We were stuck in the roof for about eight hours, praying they wouldn't burn the house.

"It was so fucking scary, you don't know if that's your last day," she says, then laughs.

"I came to a crossroads – either I live life to the fullest and make the best of it, or I wallow in the past and get stuck in this rut and feel like crap. I decided I didn't want to wallow in the rut."

The mass exodus started in 2002 after a few farmers were killed.

"Even if farmers couldn't sell their farm they went to town and sold goods, clothes and furniture.

"They drove up to our house and gave us a letter giving us five days to move out. So we packed all our stuff and moved to the city."

That was in November 2005. Since then the situation in Zimbabwe has gone from bad to worse.

Farms that were once lush and well maintained have fallen into disrepair, causing the huge food shortage.

The former United Nations Under-Secretary-General Anwarul Chowdhury, has described Mugabe as a megalomaniac. He said Mugabe was beyond reason.

The UN cannot agree on a course of action, because it relies on consensus before it can pass a resolution.

The irony is that Mugabe, although a maniac, still has support from many of Africa's leaders.

"He is still regarded as one of the leading liberation heroes of Africa," said an African correspondent who prefers not to be named, since it's getting difficult for independent journal-

ists to get access to the country.

However, some of the president's closest friends and supporters are beginning to lose faith.

Prominent Zimbabwean academic and long

time Mugabe supporter Ibbo Mandaza believes that for the good of the country Mugabe must go.

"We cannot even begin thinking of resolving the economic crisis here as long as he remains in power.

"He must quit for his own good and that of the country."

It may be little more than a pipe dream though – the fate of the country has not seemed to worry Mugabe much.

The African correspondent believes it is "only the Zimbabweans' resilience and the occasionally heavy-handedness from the security forces that prevents the country from descending into anarchy".

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who was beaten almost to death this year, is currently in Australia trying to garner support for change.

"I believe that this Zimbabwean situation has assumed almost that international crisis stage. Therefore the role of the international community is very, very important."

Tsvangirai, like many other members of the opposition, has been beaten up many times by Mugabe's cronies.

Zimbabwe's motto is "Unity, Freedom, Work".

But a lot of work is needed to get Zimbabweans free of Mugabe's despotic rule so they can unite and save their dying land.

"Hopefully he'll die in the next few years and I can go home," says Althea.

The BBC has reported that Morgan Tsvangirai is more positive.

"The people of Zimbabwe are resilient . . . and have a shared commitment to see the dictatorship go.

"The people will always prevail. No dictatorship is permanent."

"The people of Zimbabwe are resilient . . . and have a shared commitment to see the dictatorship go. The people will always prevail."