

Zimbabwe police chief in land grab at white farm

By Peta Thornycroft in Bulawayo

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ZIMBABWE'S commissioner of police has ordered a white farmer to leave his land and home, because he is moving in.

Augustine Chihuri and his wife arrived last Saturday at Woodlands Farm, Shamva, 60 miles north-west of Harare, in one of the richest agricultural areas in the country, and introduced himself to Mike Butler, the farm owner.

Mr Chihuri told Mr Butler that he and his wife would be arriving soon to take up residence in the homestead and the farm. He did not say when he would be arriving. Mr Chihuri, who supports the ruling Zanu-PF party, handed Mr Butler a piece of paper and said he had been given special permission to acquire the farm.

The paper had been signed by Joseph Made, the agriculture minister. Yesterday, Mr Made refused to comment after he heard the details of the incident at Woodlands Farm. The incident comes in a climate of mounting repression against opposition supporters and as President Mugabe steps up his campaign against white farmers.

Mr Butler's farm is lying fallow as so-called war veterans and government supporters have stopped him and his labourers from working the land. He has received only a preliminary notice of the government's intention to acquire the farm.

To make the seizure legal under Mr Mugabe's recently changed acquisition laws, Mr Butler still has to receive another order, a Section 8, and be given three months' notice to vacate his home and land.

Mr Butler has since fled Woodlands Farm with his wife, Ann, children and elderly parents who also lived there. He sent a message through a colleague that he would not talk to the press as he feared for his life.

Several incidents similar to that endured by the Butler family are slowly coming to light. In each case, farm owners who have been confronted by senior officials' demands to take over their land under so-called special permission are terrified of giving any information to the press.

Mr Mugabe says his seizure of 85 per cent of white-owned farms is to benefit landless peasants. Hopes were raised earlier this year that the crisis might be defused after some of Africa's most influential leaders supported reform plans.

But Mr Mugabe has failed to abide by the terms of the accord reached in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. In the latest diplomatic initiative, European representatives said yesterday that they had had a "difficult" time with Mr Mugabe in a 90-minute meeting.

Louis Michel, Belgium's deputy prime minister; Chris Patten, the European Union commissioner for external relations, and Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, left empty-handed and sombre after their meeting.