

White farmers flee Zimbabwe for Mozambique

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Jane Flanagan in Chimoio,
Mozambique

Home for Johan and Kirsty Fourie is a leaking tent, two hours' drive down a potholed dirt track in war-ravaged Mozambique. They have no electricity, their toilet is a hole in the ground and their water supply is a walk away in a field pitted by landmines. Even this, they say, is preferable to living on a farm in President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

The Fouries are among a new generation of pioneer white farmers who are fleeing the devastation of Mugabe's land-grab policy to make a fresh start across the border in Mozambique.

"We are starting from scratch and things are far from easy, but at least we can work and make some progress," says Johan Fourie (28), who left his family's farm in Masvingo last August after the "war veterans" moved in and began burning the land.

"At home, people are not doing much except waiting to see what happens next. Anything has to be better than that. At least there is some sort

of future here and you know that you're still going to be farming next year."

The couple, who married a year ago, are among 20 white farming families who have settled in the central Mozambican province of Manica, right on the Zimbabwean border.

Up to a dozen more have made their homes in the northern Tete province, and since last month's disputed Zimbabwean presidential elections the Mozambique government has received around 100 more applications from farmers eager to start again. Delighted by the response, the authorities are preparing packages of leased land and tax-free incentives to persuade many more to cross the border.

For Mozambique the farmers offer a chance to help galvanise the country's almost non-existent agricultural industry. Less than 5% of its arable plots are cultivated and years of fighting — first for independence, followed by a 16-year civil war — have left the land strewn with landmines and farm buildings devastated by bullets and bombs. Large swathes of the population have never had a job.

"We welcome the farmers," José da Graça, the provincial Director of Agriculture and Rural Development, said. "We are keen for foreign investment and there is no reason to discriminate against the Zimbabwean farmers. They will open up the land and the local community sees benefits from that, in terms of employment, roads and bridges. As long as they abide by our laws and respect our culture, we have no problem with them."

Tungai Sagwate is among those who have found work with one of the new settlers. He fled Mozambique's civil war for Zimbabwe 15 years ago, but is one of many thousands who decided life is better at home.

"I never dreamt that I would think life in my own country was better

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than in Zimbabwe. We are so happy these people are coming here to grow food and provide jobs," he said.

His employer Brendon Evans brought his family, a small herd of cows and a large satellite dish over the border six months ago. Their dairy and maize farm, just outside Harare, was one of the first to be invaded by government-supporting thugs. The squatters have since gone, and for a while the Evans's had some hope of returning until Mugabe "stole the election".

"Like a lot of people in Zimbabwe we had our lives on hold, but once the election was over there was no going back," Jenny Evans (28) says.

They live in a stark, unpainted, concrete house at the end of a five-mile dirt road. They are taking lessons in Portuguese and have begun a weekly study group for fellow Zimbabweans new to the area.

They meet over beer and a braai to air problems and share information about the labyrinth of rules surrounding the licensing of new companies. They complain of corruption among officials who handle the applications and the lack of financial

aid available to help them get started.

Although Mozambique has begun to embrace market reforms, land still cannot be bought or sold. New farmers can apply for 50-year leases but are limited to 2 470 acres each for which they pay about R8 080 a year.

Kirsty Fourie says: "Zimbabwean farmers are used to owning their land, not leasing it, so we have to change our way of thinking. To me it is a bit of a relief, because at least if it is taken away from us, our life savings don't go with it, which is what has happened to our parents' generation at home."

However, not everyone has welcomed the arrival of these pioneers.

For some blacks, the new white communities trigger memories of hardship under Portuguese rule and the part the white governments of South Africa and Rhodesia, as it then was, played during their long and bitter civil war.

Da Graça says: "There are many who are worried that violence will start again. People here have had enough of war, they want to live in peace."