

Lock up land invaders, c.bank urges Zimbabwe govt

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HARARE (Reuters) - Zimbabwe's central bank chief urged President Robert Mugabe's government on Thursday to arrest people invading commercial farms, branding them saboteurs of the ailing economy who were scaring off investors.

Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono stepped up his criticism of recent land invasions, warning that the resultant disruption was damaging agriculture.

Land invasions began five years ago with the tacit approval of a government pursuing its own controversial land reforms. Local media have reported a series of fresh invasions of white-owned farms in eastern Zimbabwe in recent weeks.

"Anyone invading farms now is not working for the interests of this country, is a criminal and ought to be locked away until after the harvest," Gono said during a monetary policy presentation.

"Our hearts at the central bank bleed with each story of such levels of economic disregard, such irrationality and such economic sabotage," he added.

Mugabe's government has said it would outlaw occupation of state land after reports of fresh farm seizures in eastern Zimbabwe, but Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa told Reuters recently the protection would not cover privately owned farms.

"Where no respect is given for the sanctity of private property rights, investors become apprehensive and instead plough their resources in other more secure destinations," Gono said on Thursday.

"It is for this reason that we implore the relevant authorities to institute stringent laws that protect private property."

Mugabe signed constitutional changes into law last month effectively nationalising all white-owned farms that had been seized by his government for the resettlement of black Zimbabweans over the last six years.

Gono called on newly resettled black farmers to exploit their land to the full to reduce Zimbabwe's dependency on food imports, saying they should not use the land "as weekend picnic ventures."

Critics say land expropriations are partly responsible for waning commercial agriculture and food shortages since 2001. New farmers are battle to raise production in the face of a lack of adequate funding and commercial farming

skills.

Mugabe has defended farm seizures -- some of which have been carried out through legal procedures, others by gangs of armed independence war veterans -- as necessary to correct colonial imbalances that left 70 percent of Zimbabwe's prime farming land in the hands of a few whites.

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