Round the world

BERLIN
Settling titles

REVIVING the former communist economies is dogged by the problem of titles to land.

In East Germany, fewer than a quarter of the 1.2m claims on 2.63m titles have been resolved. Now the draft law on compensating former owners has been declared as unconstitutional. The issue is being reconsidered, which is threatening new investment.

In Lithuania, collective farms were broken up into 413,000 small plots of no more than three hectares. Output on the 100,000 new private family farms has crashed. But the process has not ended: 450,000 applications for land are still being considered.

The two other Baltic states - Lithuania and Estonia - adopted an alternative approach: they sold land to the highest bidders, and former owners are being compensated with shares in industrial enterprises.

ISLAMABAD
Wealth tax

PAKISTAN'S landowners, who are exempt from income and wealth taxes, face the prospect of a new wealth tax. Previous governments failed to tax their incomes because they feared the political power of landowners. But, according to a government official, the current government is determined to widen the tax net to snare the richest class in the country - the landowners.

TEL AVIV
Peace dividend

AN ECONOMIC boom in the Palestinian enclaves was forecast as Israel Prime Minister Rabin met PLO leader Yasser Arafat for talks in Cairo on October 5. For peace brings the spoils of victory - for the land speculators.

Now that the sworn enemies are friends, the World Bank proposes to sink $3 bn into the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. The money will go into infrastructure, the first benefits of which will be reflected in a rise in the rental value of land.

In Ramallah, for example, plots for houses have tripled in price to $180,000. In Gaza, according to Business Week (Sept.27) a parcel of prime commercial property goes for $1 m.

Prime sites in Israel will also rise in value. The lifting of the Arab boycott will increase trade by $2 bn a year.

Jordan, too, will benefit with the opening of the bridges that link the kingdom with Israel. This would generate new trade worth an estimated $1 bn.

But as the politicians talk, a new fear lurks in the background for the Jewish families that moved to the occupied territories because house prices were relatively cheap. Peace, if it is lasting, will raise the price of housing and introduce a new element of conflict among people who want to live in the land given by God.

LONDON
Agro-economics

BRITISH taxpayers continue to pay a heavy price for the EEC's farm policy. Under the "reformed" agricultural policy, farmers were paid to leave land idle. This was supposed to reduce food stockpiles. Although the total area planted with cereals fell by 13% to 3m hectares, Dalgety Agriculture estimates that the grain harvest will be even higher this year. That's because farmers pocketed extra money for setting-aside their poorest land and increased the production from the fields they ploughed!

HARARE
Land rights

THE WAR of words over Zimbabwe's plan to appropriate white-owned farmland is getting hotter. The country's High Commissioner in London, Dr. N.T. Chideya, wrote to The Guardian (Sept.26) to point out that the last white colonial government - after it declared unilateral independence from Britain - passed a Land Tenure Act:

"Under the Act vast tracts of land were seized from African people and given at nominal cost to immigrants from Europe.

"It is acknowledged that the war of liberation that we waged for 15 years was mainly over the land issue.

"We must recall that there was no outcry when successive white governments forcibly drove millions of peasants from thier lands. It is ironical that illegal occupiers of this land now see Zimbabwe Government actions as 'Hitler-like' when they spend decades buttressing and fighting a war that was motivated by their hatred for the Africans."

CHESTER
Primogeniture

THE DUKE of Westminster inherited 11,000 feudal acres in Cheshire, which have been in the family since William the Conquerer granted the estate to the Grosvenors in 1068 for fighting alongside the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

The secret of old wealth, explains the present duke - he is reckoned to be the fifth richest man in England (a drop in the wealth league, thanks to the collapse in property prices) - is simple: "Those who have made money...well, the first thing they do is go out and buy land."

CANTERBURY
Subdivide & Multiply

COUNCILS in southern England want the government to curb the sale of farmland for use as caravan sites. A row has focussed on the activities of Victor Gladwish, who has made a handsome living out of dividing fields up for mobile homes - without first gaining planning permission.

Farmers claim (The Guardian, Aug.30) that he stands to make £500,000 out of a 47-acre site in Kent worth £50,000. Acting as agent for the owner, Mr. Gladwish divided the land into 147 plots and advertised them for up to £10,000. To a farmer, the average price for this land is no more than £400 an acre.

Councils have had to spend money on legal action to remove dwellers. One of them was widower James Chisholm, who paid £9,000 for a quarter-acre site. He spent five days in prison for refusing to pay a fine imposed by magistrates for illegally placing a caravan on farmland. "I was a complete twit," he says. "Mr. Gladwish obviously saw me coming."

MOSCOW

A land-rent-as-public-revenue research project will be conducted in Tatarstan by CIT's Dr. Fred Foldvary in November. Dr. Foldvary has just completed a year teaching economics at a university in Latvia. Tatarstan is one of the republics that has refused to hand over its tax revenue to Moscow.

News in Brief