

THE GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN LAND SCANDAL

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Contents

Foreword
Chapter 1 - The Letsitele Valley, Limpopo Province
Chapter 2 - Botshabelo - The Pride of Middelburg
Chapter 3 - Vryheid, KwaZulu/Natal
Chapter 4 - The Eastern Cape
Chapter 5 - Kranskop
Chapter 6 - The Dunns of KwaZulu/Natal
Chapter 7 - Levubu, Limpopo Province
Chapter 8 - Mpumalanga Province
Chapter 9 - The Limpopo Province
Chapter 10 - The Western Cape
Chapter 11 - The Northern Cape
Chapter 12 - The North West Province
Chapter 13 - The Province of Gauteng
Chapter 14 - Blydevoornitzicht No More
Chapter 15 - The Road to Poverty
Chapter 16 - Slaughter - The Farm Murder Plague
Chapter 17 - Conclusion
Sources

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every commercial farmer in South Africa, without whose skill, determination and resilience none of us would survive.
A special thanks to loyal supporters who kept my spirit high – especially Andre du Plessis (Eastern Cape) and Johan Bezuidenhout (Limpopo)

TWO NEWS ARTICLES . . .

THIS DAY, January 8, 2004

Stephen Hofstatter and Michael Schmidt

“Farmland Report Jolts Rand”

JOHANNESBURG – The land issue took political center stage in South Africa yesterday as the rand weakened in reaction to reports of massive land claims as government officials scrambled to allay fears of possible farm invasions by the landless.

The rand lost 39c against the dollar in intraday trading, retreating to R6,62 from R6,23 on Tuesday before recovering slightly to R6,59.

“It’s starting to have an impact on the market. You can see that the issue is becoming an increasing focus ahead of the April elections”, Callum Henderson, the Bank of America’s emerging markets analyst, told Reuters yesterday.

Later this month President Thabo Mbeki is expected to sign an amendment to the restitution act into law that will allow land to be expropriated from farmers opposing claims government deems valid.

Reuters, 07 January, 2004

“Dispossessed want 20% of SA Farmland”

By Alistair Thomson

Families and communities evicted by the apartheid state are claiming 40 to 50 percent of commercial farmland in some provinces and around 20 percent nationally, the land claims chief said on Wednesday.

Currency traders have cited foreign media reports that land restitution would be accelerated ahead of elections this year as a concern for foreign investors given the land grab in next-door Zimbabwe, which South Africa has vowed not to repeat.

A new law that has focused attention on land issues will allow the government to expropriate land for restitution where negotiations on a “willing buyer, willing seller” basis fail.

The New York Times reported that in KwaZulu/Natal up to 70 percent of farmland was subject to land claims – a figure Chief Land Claims Commissioner Tozi Gwanya said was exaggerated. “The real figure is around 40 to 50 percent”, Gwanya told Reuters. He said 155 000 hectares of KwaZulu/Natal were due to be handed back to nine separate communities in February or March 2004 in one of the biggest transfers to date.

THE GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN LAND SCANDAL FOREWORD

This book cried out to be written. Stories about the collapse of farms handed over to emerging farmers under the government’s land reform program have circulated for some time. But over the last two years, the desecration of some of South Africa’s productive farmland has increased to such an extent that land is being taken out of production at an alarming rate.

The ominous element in the picture is: where will it end? Now that the government has given itself powers to expropriate land at will, for whatever purpose, will the end of this destruction ever be in sight?

Concerned farmers are supporting the publication of this book. They see first hand every day the results of the government’s land restitution program. Occasionally one reads about these catastrophes in newspapers. Some television actuality programs feature farms which have been destroyed after a handover. But there appears to have been no concerted effort by anyone to actually investigate the outcome of these transactions, both for the benefit of the public which paid for the land, and in light of the broader problem of decreasing food production in the country.

In most cases, at least as far as newspapers are concerned, handovers are depicted with exuberance by reporters. Pictures of people toyi-toying after receiving title deeds to their ancestral land are complemented by gratuitous individual stories of people returning to “the land of their birth”. In many instances, this is not the case. In

any event, why haven't questions been asked one or two years down the line about what became of this joyous transfer? Some follow ups occur, but not many. And they are journalists' probes, not government assessments.

This is not a scientific book in the sense that every single land claim transaction has been investigated. Indeed, we have just started. Perhaps this book should be called Volume One. There appear to be hundreds of examples of farm collapses after restitution. We didn't have the resources to hire an army of researchers to search and account for every farm which has been lost to production, or has been turned into a squatter camp.

But we have garnered enough evidence, at least as a start, to realize that there is a very ominous and ultimately calamitous trend afoot in South Africa, the results of which could seriously undermine food production.

Our researchers were in some instances part time. But they were dedicated and had the advantage of knowing the South African agricultural sector well. Opening one door led to other doors, and a picture emerged which differed little from one end of South Africa to the other. There were no examples found where the conditions existing on the farm at the time of transfer had either been maintained or improved, without the help of outsiders. In some instances, those to whom the farm had belonged helped the new owners. Other examples revealed white managers brought in quietly after production started to wobble.

In many cases, the beneficiaries were left to their own devices. Some recipients really wanted to farm but received little or no assistance. In other situations, a committee representing "the tribe" simply took over the farm, awarding themselves large salaries while carrying on with their lives somewhere else. The workers "ran" the farm until something broke, then the rot set in. Operating capital simply disappeared on salaries, 4 x 4 vehicles and travel expenses, with workers eventually demonstrating in a nearby town for back salaries.

One researcher was shot at by an angry chief, while another was told he must make written application to visit a ailed land reform farm which, in reality, belongs to the taxpayers. He went anyway. There was nobody at the gate, and a detailed examination was made of the farm without anyone even asking who he was!

This is not a definitive history of who is ultimately entitled to what land in South Africa. There are dozens of academic sources where the origins of land ownership can be quoted, and counter-argued. This book is concerned about agricultural production in the last nation in Africa which is self-sufficient in food. We don't want another Zimbabwe. If 35 000 commercial farmers produce enough food for the people of Southern Africa, why take their farms?

We discovered a number of outrageous land claims – some based on hearsay, others which overlapped as different tribal warlords fought for the same piece of turf. Some claims were simply lies, while others claimed ground for which they had already been compensated. The existence of graves was another reason for land claims.

An important heritage site has been claimed, not by people whose tribal forefathers lived on the ground, but by people whose forefathers were taken in by the missionaries who created the site, to escape warring tribal chiefs. Through the grace and charity of these missionaries, they were allowed to stay and their children were born at the mission. Now their descendants are claiming the heritage site!

Under what duress do South African farmers operate? They pay taxes for security, yet they conduct their own policing. Many operate in the most violent environment - outside of a war - in the world.

We examine how land claims have affected operating farmers, why they can't sell, or obtain a bank loan. Many have been driven off their farms by invaders and intimidation. They have turned the key on a lifetime of work. Others have been threatened with death. More than 1 500 have been brutally murdered since 1994, in many instances without anything being stolen.

Stock and crop theft are endemic. Aged farmers sit out all night against a tree, shotgun cocked, to catch the corn thieves. Others go into dangerous locations to find their stolen stock because police assistance is simply not available. Farmers pay handsomely for private security, but those supposed to be guarding their property are themselves intimidated and flee.

South Africa can do without its advertising agencies and retail boutiques and horse racing, but it cannot do without its farmers. If matters continue as they are, and productive farms are handed over to people who cannot farm and who do not want to farm, then we are on the Zimbabwe slippery slope. South African farmers are taxed to the hilt. They have high input costs, and they receive very little in the way of relief from the government. They are harassed by human rights investigators, and they are the subject of vicious propaganda.

In a covert way, it appears the SA government has come to realize that handing over a farm to subsistence farmers is a failure, but they are slow to admit this. Instead, they quietly bring in managers and consultants who rectify – if possible – the damage done, and the patched-up project is again given to the same beneficiaries. A further stratagem is to bring in “mentors” who assist black farmers on a daily basis, checking everything and in effect running the farm. There is also the new lease-back policy. But there are inherent problems with these policies. Why not let those who can farm continue to produce the food to feed the millions in Southern Africa?

There are many black farmers who have made a success of ventures, and they are lauded for their hard work, and for the risks they have taken. Neighbouring white farmers are only too happy to assist. But some black farmers obtained loans from the Land Bank, then used their newly-acquired farms as taxi repair depots.

There are alarming signs that no commercial farm is safe in South Africa. At one meeting between land claimants and commercial farmers, the claimants told the farmers “Just give us your title deeds. Then you can work for us”. What is really sought by many claimants is a productive farm which someone else will run so that a large salary and profits can be taken from the operation without too much effort.

Some farmers could not talk to us for fear of reprisals. One farmer was scared to death. His farm is next to a huge squatter camp. He told us he had to keep quiet “so I can at least get something for my farm from the Department of Land Affairs”. His farm contains a R1 million dairy operation, but nobody wants to buy his farm. He is trying to get whatever price he can from the government. It is too dangerous for him to stay on the property. He has already moved his family to town, and appointed a manager.

In one area of KwaZulu Natal, the farming community has been reduced from 56 to 14. In another part of the province, trenches have been dug to stop stock theft. Cruelty to farm animals turns one's stomach. Some farmers have to resort to witchcraft to find their cattle. Farmer Piet de Jager of Levubu told an agricultural magazine he wouldn't give up his farm. He'd worked for the farm all his life, he was 69, and “what will I do with my life without my farm?” Two weeks after the published interview, he was shot to death in his garden, a few metres from his house, his wife and his grandchildren. Nothing was stolen.

This book is not the beginning. The story started many years ago. I grew up on a cattle ranch on the border of Botswana and South Africa. When my father's farm was expropriated by the old National Party government under the homelands scheme, he died of a stroke. I submitted a claim for the return of this farm in November 1998 but have heard nothing from the government. To date, more than 900 land claims have been submitted to the government by whites and Indians, people whose farms were taken by the previous government.

By highlighting in a small way the heritage which the white farming sector brought to South Africa, we in no way wish to ignore the many black, coloured and Indian farmers who have also struggled, who are also beset with stock and crop theft, intimidation and, at times, assaults. Few acknowledge the contribution to this country of its small band of commercial farmers of all races, and we believe it's time to tell their story. And why not? Everybody else's story has been told!

Cry the beloved country indeed! If many blacks cannot make it as commercial farmers, it is well to remember that most whites are not farmers either. Farming is a highly specialized, risky business. One simply cannot "resign" from farming and get another job. It is a holistic profession, and the land is an emotive element in the equation.

Most of us are "landless", in the literal sense of the word. The 12% of arable land in this country is very fragile. South Africa is not a farming friendly country. Productive farmland has been built up over many years and must not be destroyed with impunity. We believe jobs, not land, are what people want. They need a roof over their head, and education for their children. Destroying good farms is a lose-lose situation, for all of us.

This book is a joint effort between myself and our team of researchers. It will be sent all over the world. South Africans should read it with concern. They take so much for granted - the full supermarkets, the mountains of fruit and vegetables, the steaks, the chops, the boerewors (literally, the 'Boer sausage' - the staple sausage in South Africa.) All of this comes from less than .01% of our population - 35 000 farmers who provide for South Africa's 45 million people. South Africans must resist the senseless transfer of land for ideological reasons.

Dr. Philip du Toit, South Africa, 25 December 2003.

Chapter One

THE LETSITELE VALLEY, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

Paradise is where the devil does his damndest.

“Don’t even talk about logic in this part of the world”.

So declared pioneer farmer Mike Amm as we walked towards his small holding high in the mountains outside Tzaneen. He was one of seven farmers who sold their farms in this beautiful valley to the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) for land restitution purposes.

Over the past two years, he has observed with dismay how the farms he and his family spent their lifetimes building up, have crumbled and decayed to the point where they have been placed under judicial management.

The word “management” is something of a misnomer, as nothing is happening on these farms. One of Amm’s farms, Murlebrook, was a prime producer of avocados, mangoes, paw paws, bananas, citrus fruits and macadamia nuts.

Amm shows us his large file on the debacle he has chronicled on the demise of his family farm. The file contains the history of the farm and how it was claimed. He wants to get the message out to what he feels is an uncaring South Africa. “Tell South Africa what is happening to agriculture in this country,” he pleads. His letters, exhortations and suggestions to the new owners are all there - offers to assist with business plans, or any assistance the new owners might want - are open-heartedly offered by a man who cares about South Africa and the country’s agricultural production. He is deeply worried about agriculture’s end game.

Nothing would have pleased this farmer more than to have helped keep Murlebrook alive, even if he didn’t own the farm any more. But his endeavours were ignored. Indeed, he and his fellow farmers in the area were told in no uncertain terms that the new owners would “go it alone”.

A report in the local Letaba Herald of February 2001 shows the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, Ms. Thoko Didiza, signing the R43 million land agreement for the purchase of the Letsitele Valley farms, while Limpopo MEC for Agriculture and Land Administration, Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, looks on.

Three thousand people attended the taxpayer-funded shindig which followed the signing. The celebrations were about the restitution of 1 400 ha of land in the valley (the seven commercial farms) to the Mamathola tribe.

The newspaper report declares that “in terms of the government’s Land Restitution Act, the Mamathola had successfully claimed the land on the grounds that the 13 farms involved had formerly belonged to their ancestors but were taken over by white settlers. (Yes, “settlers” was the word used for white South African citizens whose ancestors came to South Africa around the same time as American citizens’ ancestors arrived in North America).

In her address at this “historic occasion”, Ms. Didiza urged the 1,500-strong tribe to administer these highly productive farms on a sound business basis to sustain their economic viability and prosperous future.

“We do not want to see these farms becoming derelict, and you roaming the streets of Tzaneen as beggars” she said. As the new owners, she continued, the tribe had to work efficiently “to disprove the perception of white critics that black people are lazy and incapable of managing farms”.

The Limpopo MEC for Agriculture Dr. Motsoaledi then stated it was critical that “whites must adapt to the wind of change or die. No one will kill them but if they cannot adapt they will just cease to live,” he remarked. He then went on to say the government had established an Agriculture College to train those who want to run farms.



A deserted packing shed after the handover: the Amm farm, Letsitele.



A dejected “Murlebrook” entrance – the Amm farm after the handover.

White owners

Speaking on behalf of the departing white owners, Mrs. Maggie Baleta said it was a disappointing experience for them to leave farms on which some of them had lived and worked for 43 years. She said these farms generated a turnover in excess of R15 million a year and that “the tribe would need good planning and dedication to ensure that they remained economically viable for all”.

She said the farmers were willing to help the tribe manage the resettlement of farms and to work together for the economic development of the area.

In reply, the claimants’ committee chairman Mr. Chiko Letsoalo expressed confidence in their ability to run the farms on their own without assistance from previous white owners.

“We are surprised about stories that we or the government would enter into partnership with the current owners so as not to lose the benefit of their expertise. We have already sent people to agricultural colleges to learn more about farming. We will run these farms through our own expertise”, he declared.

He said the tribe would “restructure” the farming operations. His tribe were given R4,5 million as operating capital.

The arrogance of this group of people is, in hindsight, only exceeded by their ignorance and incompetence. Their “going it alone” has resulted in the complete collapse of these farms, while Ms. Didiza, to all intents and purposes, has remained silent about her colossal failure in this regard.

Let us examine this land claim so that South Africa’s taxpayers, who paid for this land and donated the operating capital, can examine the processes of the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) and judge for themselves. Let it be said here that the Letsitele experience has occurred right throughout South Africa, with few variations. Some of the disasters are monumental, others not so grand but ominous nonetheless, because they expose a critical flaw in South Africa’s land “reform” process, a process which seems to have been ignored by those organizations we thought would have been the first to examine just where this policy would ultimately take South Africa.

The Letsitele Valley

This valley is situated 30 km south of Tzaneen, in South Africa’s northern Limpopo province. Farmer Mike Amm has known the valley since 1947.

His wife Monica and her father Noel Tooley were born there. The valley has always been one of the prime agricultural areas of the South African lowveld.

It has produced impressive quantities of fruit and vegetables - citrus, bananas, mangoes, avocados, papaya, litchis, macadamia nuts, tomatoes and a wide array of other vegetables.

The export of many of these products has earned South Africa valuable foreign currency, while the production of these crops and the development of the valley created employment for many thousands of people. The conservation of water through the building of storage dams was an impressive contributory factor to the agricultural success of the valley. The total volume of water stored in dams constructed by private farmers runs into several million cubic meters.

Vast sums of money were spent on the efficient use of water in the form of pumping plants, pipelines, lined canals, drip irrigation and the sophisticated computerised application of this precious resource. In the 1970’s, an Irrigation Board was formed to control the fair and efficient use of irrigation water.

Mamathola 635

At the headwaters of the Letsitele River lay a farm called Mamathola 635 which was also known as Mamathola's Location, and is marked on old maps. This land measuring approximately 1 500 ha had been allocated to the Mamathola people some years before.

This community worked on neighbouring farms and existed on "slash and burn" subsistence agriculture. It is well known that this type of land use is extremely degrading to the environment. The land had become almost completely denuded through over-grazing and other destructive forms of land use. After even light rainfalls, the Letsitele River would turn a red colour from the soil-eroded areas on Mamathola 635. Aerial photographs of that period bear witness to this fact.

During the 1940's, the government under the United Party's Jan Smuts was alerted to this deteriorating situation and was requested to take action. For years debate raged in Parliament regarding this issue. And all the while the situation worsened.

Around 1956, the government decided to move the community from Mamathola's location to two farms in the Trichardtsdal area. The farms "Metz" and "Enable" totaling approximately 7 000 ha were allocated to the tribe. Most of the people moved willingly although a few moved with reluctance.

It should be emphasized that the Mamathola community were not moved for political, but for conservation reasons. The community was more than adequately compensated in terms of land area, buildings, social infrastructure, roads, and so forth.

Mamathola 635 was then handed over to the Department of Forestry to rehabilitate the land. This step proved to be timeous and within a few years the land at the headwaters of the Letsitele River started to recover environmentally. Streams became stabilized and began flowing more cleanly and constantly. Eroded areas began slowly to recover vegetatively. But even to this day, the scars caused by the tribe's destructive practices can still be seen.

28 October 1949

History in the form of a letter written to friends in England by an acquaintance of Mike Amm's was presented to the DLA as further proof that the tribe's removal was not political. This personal account reveals the land in question to be in a state of severe jeopardy, and vulnerable to complete collapse. Had the government of the day not removed those who were destroying the headwaters of the valley and surrounds (to wit, the Mamathloa tribe), there would be nothing there today upon which they could exist, let alone claim back as a viable concern.

We quote from the 1949 letter:

"We went as far as the jeep could go. The road was quite good to begin with, but the scenery was desolate as it was all through the native location where they have ruined the land by constant ploughing and planting of corn (called 'mealies' in South Africa) on the slopes until now nothing will grow at all, not even grass. It's just barren red earth with patches of whitish soil here and there. After about 2 – 3 miles of this we came to the Forestry boundary and what a change! On one side of the line this bare earth, on the other thick grass and forests. The line itself is only about six feet across and yet it looks like a different country. The farmers around here are trying to get the Native Commissioner to move the people from this part so that the land may be given

to the Forestry Department for reclamation. Wherever the locations are, the land is ruined as the people will not cultivate it properly.”

Concerned that the original erosion situation might return to the Letsitele headwaters after the farms were handed over, Amm wrote to the Kruger National Park for an update and advice. In April 2000, the Kruger National Park replied that *“the Letsitele River is an important tributary to the Letaba River and as such is an important contributor to water availability in the already stressed Letaba catchment. This river has been reduced from a once perennial river to one that now often ceases flowing in the dry months. Due to this situation, the Kruger National Park strongly urges consideration and extreme care to be given to the current and proposed future land use options for the sensitive Letsitele Valley region.”*

The letter continued: *“The case must be strongly made that the land should be retained in a sustainable and conservation-friendly manner to ensure protection of the upper catchment of this vital river. Options for sustainable conservation-based eco-tourism ventures must be considered for the region in question”.*

Given the parlous condition of the Letaba headwaters before the Mamathola tribe was moved, the worry clearly exists that with their takeover of the farms, these original conditions may return, with disastrous results all round.

The Early Nineties

Things changed in the early nineties, according to local people. The unbanning of Nelson Mandela and the cries for land for the landless led to the 1994 and subsequent land legislation after the ANC came to power. The people were promised land and were given the opportunity to claim land from which they felt they had been forcibly removed.

Certain parameters were laid down as to what would constitute a valid claim. For example, if compensation had been paid then a claim against that same land would be invalid. (In the Mamathola land claim case, this was totally ignored, but we will come to that later).

Never in their wildest dreams did farmers in the area we interviewed realize that productive farms would collapse so spectacularly, and that the government would seemingly ignore what farmers believed were logical requests to leave South Africa's productive farms alone, and utilize other sources of land to grant to the landless.

This thought is echoed throughout South Africa. Why in Heaven's name hand over a productive farm to those who really don't want to farm it and, in many instances, to people who firmly believe the operation will continue producing a healthy income without any hard work, risk or capital input?

Why indeed! As Amm declared, logic doesn't come into it, and this is the dark side of land reform. It is actually not reform. In many cases, it is destruction, and the perils in store for South Africa's agricultural production cannot be overstated.

But let us return to the Letsitele handover.

In May 2000, a group of valley farmers received a letter from the Land Claims Commission stating that a claim on their portions of the farm Mamathola 609 had been gazetted, and that they were to appear at a meeting in Tzaneen to discuss the issue.

At the meeting the farm owners declared the claim was invalid because there had been no forced removal from Mamathola 609 which lay several kilometers from Mamathola's location (or 635).

But the chairman of the meeting, Mr. Phogiso Molapo, retorted that the farmers' argument would carry little weight because the community would claim their cattle would have grazed over the whole area of the Letsitele Valley anyway! Amm declares this statement alone made a mockery of the whole land claims process.

Further, the land claim forms were full of inaccuracies. The claimants admitted that they had been compensated, but said the new land was "too small". (They received 7 000 ha to replace 1 500 ha). They said the new farm "was far from their graves" but there were no graves on the original piece of property. They also said they had to build new houses, churches, schools, etc. but these were in fact built for them when they moved, with taxpayers' money. They also declared they received little compensation for their orange plants, but they were paid one pound a tree. According to people who knew the situation at that time, these trees had been in any case stolen from farmers in the area!

The farmers asked what were the conditions to obtain compensation. They adopted a non-confrontational approach as a matter of necessity. They felt they would get nowhere by any other means. They were offered three options regarding valuation of the properties, and they commissioned a local private valuer. Most of the owners were satisfied with the values apportioned. These values were presented to the Lands Claims Commissioner (LCC).

A few months later, a valuer sent by the LCC arrived to value the farms. His values were considerably higher than those of the private valuer. Yet these higher amounts were the values the LCC accepted! Deeds of sale were signed and the farmers were paid out. Some were given time to harvest their crops, while others moved out immediately.

At no time did the incoming "owners" ask to see the Amm farm's books, nor did they check any inventories. As they had declared they would "go it alone", they asked no advice of the farmers. The government produced a business plan showing the potential income from the farms as R100 million a year, but this plan was clearly not utilized.

The Amm family left with a heavy heart. Mike and Monica had lived on the farm Murlebrook for 43 years, raised five children and built what they called "a bit of paradise" from nothing. Amm says his type of farming is highly technical and requires 24-hour attention. The Banareng ba ga Letsoalo committee (the name under which the land claims were made) was elected to run the farm on behalf of the tribes. Not one person on this committee had agricultural knowledge or background.

What Happened Next

The Banareng ba ga Letsoalo land claim was ostensibly for 1 500 people to return to their original land. As it later turned out, none of these people returned at all. The committee was appointed to represent them, and this committee would "run" the farm on behalf of the tribe. The committee, as it also turned out, didn't run the farm at all – they had meetings, of course, but most had businesses elsewhere. One was a panel beater from Hammanskraal (he was the treasurer). Another was a teacher, one was a clerk and the other unemployed. The chairman worked in a bookshop and still works for a publisher. He occupied the 4-bedroomed farmhouse. Nobody from the committee was born in the area. Most are believed to come from Pretoria.

This committee awarded themselves over R12 000 a month each, and went through the operating capital of R4,5 million like a hot knife through butter. They called themselves the "management team" but nothing was managed. The labour

continued to work the farm until the pumps broke, or a machine broke down. These were not repaired. Then there was no money for spraying, and soon salary payments were in arrears.

This ultimately resulted in the farm workers marching five kilometres to the farm office where they toyi-toyi'd and presented a memorandum of grievances. This was February 2003, just 24 months after the newspaper report where DLA Minister Didiza told the world the beneficiaries of the handover would "go it alone", and that the project would prove to the world that black farmers were not lazy and that they were indeed capable of running a farm.

Labour grievances included the late payment of salaries, the incompetence of management, no production bonuses, and threats and undermining of workers' representatives. The manager of the farm committee Ismael Letsoalo said he couldn't pay salaries because he hadn't received the "additional funds" he'd requested from the Limpopo Regional Land Claims Commission.

What was found on the farms

Our researcher and a local farmer requested permission from the judicial manager of the farm to visit Murlebrook. (His role as judicial manager was defined by someone local as "making sure nothing is stolen".) On their way to the farm, the team was telephonically contacted and told the local Land Claims Commissioner wanted a written application to visit the farm, and that there was no guarantee permission would be granted. As they were on their way anyway, the team continued. On arrival, they simply walked in. The judicial "manager" did not appear while the team inspected the farm, taking photos and talking to a few people who were sitting around at the entrance.

The team found avocado trees dying of thirst. While the farm dam was full, the pipes from the dam were broken - there was apparently no money to fix them. The trees' leaves had curled up and were sunburnt. It was too late to save those beautiful trees. The mango trees' spring blossoms were out, but these trees were not watered either. The papayas hung from dry trunks, while grass and weeds grew between the expertly laid out plantation rows.

Said our researcher: "It was criminal to see such waste, such desolation. Three state-of-the-art packing sheds were empty, loose crates lying about. There was not a soul to be seen. Electricity had been cut off so the cool rooms didn't work. We left and moved to the next farm. Nobody stopped us as we drove across a stream (yes, this was a farm where a river ran through it!), but the stream was polluted with plastic bags, pieces of rusting equipment, rubble. Desolation had set in here too. The farmhouse looked forlorn and a cultivated garden had disappeared into weeds and sparse long grass.

We came to a packing shed. A black gentleman was at the gate and we asked for the farmer, the owner. Oh, you mean Mr. Mtetwa (not his real name!). He's not here. He doesn't live here. He lives in town. Then what happens here, we asked. Well, we've still got some bananas, the watchman declared. But they're small. They're for the bakkie (Afrikaans for a pick-up vehicle) trade.

We'd learnt what to look for in neglected banana plantations, the un-pruned, uncared-for trees. They are left to sprout many smaller shoots which grow from the trunk, and smaller bananas result. The bunches were not covered with plastic to protect them from the burning sun.

We couldn't help noticing the difference between these pigmy fruits and the large bananas which Gauteng consumers paid R1 59 per kilo for in late 2003. Each tree is pruned, and the bunches are covered with blue plastic bags which hold in the moisture while deflecting the sun's burning rays.

These beautiful plantations roll on and on for kilometers right throughout the sub-tropical and lowveld areas of South Africa, and one wonders at the mentality of a government whose policies would destroy this immaculate farming and replace it with subsistence "bakkie trade" production.

As we drove through this once beautiful farm, we came upon neglected macadamia groves. Thousands and thousands of macadamia nuts lay under the trees, unharvested. These are the most expensive nuts on the market: South Africa's macadamia export production goes mainly to the United States where consumers can afford them. In South Africa, they are priced at R110,00 a kilo.

The trees had not been pruned and the ground underneath had not been cleared. Further on, a citrus orchard's trees gasped for water in the searing heat. These "ghost farms" are appearing all over South Africa.

Why the Wheels Came Off

Arrogance and ignorance are a lethal concoction. When people don't know what they don't know, the results are catastrophic. Soon after the 2001 takeover of the Letsitele farms, the general secretary of the farm's committee admitted that "one of the big problems in taking over these farms was that the previous owners tended to be managers as well, and that left a management gap that we are still trying to fill." However, he continued, "we have sent people to agricultural college to learn more about farming and we are confident in our ability to run these farms on our own".

Did Minister Didiza know about this paucity of knowledge, experience and management before she handed over taxpayer-funded farms? If she didn't, why didn't she find out? Why didn't she at least check up on the progress of the management committee? After all, this was funded with public money. And what about the production loss to the country?

Two years later, this same secretary complained that the government didn't assist them with a business plan and a training program. (But a business plan had been set up, although not utilized.) He complained that the government should have sent them Agricultural Extension Officers (AEO). From the time of the handover, only three "managers" of the original committee were left, the whole R4,5 million operating capital had disappeared, the labourers only received R310,00 per month (what about the minimum wages which the government insists all commercial farmers should pay their staff?), while the last of the mangoes were so diseased they had to be thrown away. The farm's previous owner's fertilizer and spray programs were highly effective, but no spraying had taken place because of mismanagement.

The farming equipment which had been handed over in pristine condition was virtually unusable, but the R12 000 a month salaries were still taken until the farm operation was placed under judicial management!

The Indigenous Nursery

An arboretum of more than 200 indigenous trees – each individually marked – was painstakingly created by Monica Amm on the family farm. Called the Matumi

Botanical Garden, the trees and an accompanying nursery attracted visitors from all over the world.

The Amms called a meeting in June 2001 at which members of the new farm management committee and people from the Limpopo departments of Environment and Agriculture were present. The meeting was to discuss the continuance of the arboretum as an eco-tourism project, and to give the meeting the assurance that the Amms would do everything in their power to assist in the further development of the nursery as well as the arboretum.

The nursery could produce indigenous trees and medicinal plants, for which a ready market already existed. There was adequate irrigation to maintain the nursery. (The Amms and their family are the only South African members of the International Dendrology Association, while Mike Amm is a well-known and accomplished amateur botanist.)

Everyone was positive and promised to report back. Today the arboretum is dry and neglected, and nobody maintains the nursery which has virtually disappeared. The electric fencing doesn't work. Needless to say, there was no comeback from the provincial government departments. It is a tragedy that even today, overseas tourists still come to look for the famous arboretum, which is no more.

Judicial Management

An application by the State Attorney for the farms to be placed under judicial management was made in January 2003, purportedly on behalf of the Department of Land Affairs, and a commission of enquiry was to be established to find out what happened to the R4,5 million operating capital granted to the farms' management committee. It was reported that the Scorpions would become involved and investigate the misappropriation of funds and mismanagement.

These farms were among the best in the world. Mike Amm's farm alone contained 100 000 trees. A dam he built was the biggest in the district. The farms contained sophisticated irrigation equipment, and the thousands of trees were nurtured to world standards. The rainfall average in the area is 1 000 mm per annum. (Consider that the average rainfall in most of South Africa is 464 mm against a world average of 857 mm). Permanent mountain streams run through many of the valley's properties and the dams are well sited, with gravity irrigation from some. The farm valuer declared in his official valuation that the farms were situated in an area "with abundant water".

The climate is sub-tropical and frost free with average summer temperatures of 29°C and 23°C during winter. The soil in the area is predominantly a sandy loam type, very fertile and with excellent drainage capacity. According to a professional valuer, "the Letsitele Valley can be regarded as one of the best farming areas in the country mainly due to climate and soil factors, but also because of the professional way farmers run their businesses".

(Less than 12% of South Africa's land is suitable for cultivation. Twenty one percent of the country has a total rainfall of less than 200 mm annually, 48% between 200 mm and 600 mm, while only 31% records more than 600 mm.)

The Amms left a beautiful house they built themselves, a manager's house, a separate flat, staff quarters, a reservoir, boreholes, irrigation systems, three packing sheds and sophisticated farm equipment. They watched their years of work eroded because of a fallacious land claim, and because the SA government did not even stick

to its own rules when granting this claim. More importantly, there had been no follow up programs to ensure that all went well.

It is not as if the government wasn't warned. The *Letaba Herald* ran an article in September 2000 expressing grave misgivings about the handover of the valley farms to DLA recipients. The paper said that there were signs that the government's land reform policy could become a "sword of Damocles" over the country's agricultural economy. People in the area had seen the disastrous destruction of the Zebediela and other citrus estates after they were given to inexperienced recipients. Millions of rands were lost not only in the price paid to the exiting farmers, but in the huge deficits in export sales, and in the taxes which could have been generated from these productive farms. Now the same thing was about to occur in Letsitele.

The paper continued: "Inexperienced, inadequately funded people who move onto currently white-owned farms could eventually find themselves in a morass of debt, unemployment and the inability to even produce food for themselves at a sustainable rate." Unfortunately, these premonitions and fears were not repeated in the national press.

The *Herald* noted that the valley's "3 000 ha or so of intensive citrus, mango, avocado, banana and papaya orchards bring in tens of millions of rands in foreign currency every year and support a labour force of between 2 000 and 3 000 black workers, plus their families. Now its continued existence as a world-recognized agricultural gem is being threatened by separate, even conflicting, Land Restitution Act claims on white-owned farms in the valley. It's a recipe for shambles. There are only going to be losers, not winners."

Mike Amm was quoted at length. He told the paper that at a recent meeting with the provincial Land Claims Commission, the farmers informed the Commission that the land claims had virtually stopped all development on the valley farms, that retrenchments were already under way and further jobs would be lost, and that banks and other financial institutions were reluctant to support valley farmers who had land claims against them, as they could not offer acceptable security.

Likely Scenario

Asked what would be the most likely scenario if the farms were handed over as going concerns to the claimants, Amm referred to the history of two once-productive farms in the valley which had been bought by the old homeland Lebowa government for tribal occupation.

One became derelict and was then leased to a white farmer who lived well off it for 20 years and employed 400 people. In 1999, his lease expired and he left, leaving his farm improvements intact.

Just one year later, the farm has sank back to its original dilapidated state. Squatters moved in, fences torn down and irrigation piping was stolen. The mangoes became sick and the trees planted for windbreaks were chopped down for firewood. Four hundred people lost their jobs.

The other was the well-known Rolf Flowers operation which had a capital-intensive infrastructure and employed hundreds of people on its 100 ha. It was purchased from Rolf Flowers by the government in the early nineties (it bordered on one of the traditional lands) and today stands forlorn, with its buildings vandalized and its equipment ransacked.

Everything which could be stolen has already been taken, and nothing is going on. There seems little concern by the powers that be about the waste of taxpayers'

money for this purchase. The only move the government has apparently made is to employ security guards to protect what remains from further vandalism.

But saddest of all was the story of a black businessman who, up to late 1998, had had a thriving trading store at Giyani. He knew little about fruit farming but decided to buy a citrus and mango farm, with a turnover of about R2 million a year. This farm was next to Amm's farm in the valley. He was given a R2,4 million Land Bank loan, plus a R100 000 production loan, and friendly advice and practical help from his neighbours.

Then he, like his neighbours, was hit by floods and he lost much of his mango crop, while his fences were damaged. He certainly had bad luck but so did everybody. This farmer was in deep trouble. He couldn't meet his land Bank payments and he couldn't afford to spray his mangoes which were then in full flower. He couldn't harvest his fruit because he had little money to pay his labour or buy diesel for his tractors. What fruit he had was stolen at night. His phone was cut off and he had no more air time on his cell phone.

This is what farming is all about, and it is clear that little of the downside of agriculture is relayed to prospective land reform beneficiaries. If it were, would they take on farming at all? (Notable is the fact that during the floods in the area, white farmers had to repair roads and bridges at their own expense).

Valley farmers believe that the same situation and conditions apply throughout the country. And they are right. Said one farmer we spoke to: "Every single person, black or white, in the Letaba district is dependent in one way or another on agriculture. It should not be allowed to go into decline. In the broader sense, the rich, productive valley could be lost to the South African economy. There will be no winners, only losers!"

How prescient he was. But nobody was listening, least of all the arrogant and the ignorant for whose sins the whole of South Africa must pay.

Now that the government has given itself powers to expropriate property throughout South Africa at will, it needs no fertile imagination to think what will happen to the productive farms upon which Minister Didiza will set her sights. There's nothing stopping her, except of course a dearth of food in South Africa's shops, no surplus grain to send to friends across the Limpopo, no taxes from bankrupt and destroyed farms, and no foreign currency to be earned from agricultural exports.

When a government sets out to force through a policy on ideological grounds, without pause to assess what has happened to previous land transfers, then it is criminally responsible for whatever disasters await us in the future. It is clearly not only up to Mike Amm to shout from the rooftops. South Africans of all shades must do something now. When it's too late, it's too late. A broken house can be rebuilt in a week. A destroyed farm takes years to recover, and it needs dedication, love, hard work and skill. These qualities are already in short supply within a community which sees its life's work and its productive farms collapsing before its very eyes.

Chapter Two

BOTSHABELO – THE PRIDE OF MIDDELBURG

Just 12 kilometres north of the Mpumalanga town of

Middelburg is an historical gem which appears to be little known to many South Africans. It is now the subject of a land claim, a claim by people whose forefathers were given succour by missionaries in the nineteenth century and who are now demanding the very land to which their ancestors fled and which fostered them in their time of need.

Enormous tensions have built up in Middelburg between those who are afraid for the future of Botshabelo, and the claimants, some of whom have publicly declared they will turn the South African Heritage Site into a pig farm. The claimants plan to house hundreds of families on the site. The controversy is raging outside South Africa's borders, as far afield as Germany. The Botshabelo affair is an egregious example of how the South African government's land reform policy is out of control, and where the practical has been suffocated by the ideological.

Bothshabelo was established by German missionaries Alexander Merensky and Heinrich Grutzner in 1865. These two men were sent to South Africa by the Berlin Missionary Society, and arrived in Natal in 1858. There they made contact with the Zulus and the Swazis, and then began working among the Pedis with the permission of their king. Their first mission station was built in Gerlachtshoop, in the area controlled by the Pedi chief Maleo. With permission of the tribal chief Sekwati, more missions were built.

Sekwati died in 1861 and his son Sekhukhune inherited the Pedi crown. Two of his wives converted to Christianity and were baptized. This step caused much dissension within the tribe.

One stormy night the Merenskys were woken at the mission Gerlachtshoop in Sekhukhuneland by a distraught convert from Sekukhune's kraal. He warned that hundreds of the chief's impis were on their way to the mission. At that very moment Merensky's wife went into labour, giving birth to a daughter within earshot of the chanting and howling warriors. Merensky sent a message for help to neighbour Hermanus Steyn who farmed on the other side of the Steelpoort river, the border between Sekhukhuneland and the old Boer Republic of the Transvaal, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). Steyn sent a wagon packed with roof thatching.

It stopped near the mission station and Merensky's wife and child hid under the thatching grass and were taken across the rising river to safety, together with the black converts from the mission. The water rose so quickly after Mrs. Merensky's crossing that the impis could not cross.



The old German missionary church at Botshabelo - a proposed heritage site.

On 21 January, 1865 Merensky and Grutzner bought the farm Boshhoek (in the district of Middelburg) from Jan Abraham Joubert. On 8 February Merensky, his family and 113 refugees from Sekhukhune moved onto the farm which they called Toevlugsoord. It later became known as Botshabelo (“place of refuge”).

Johannes Dikwanjane, Sekhukhune’s brother, was one of the leaders of the tribal refugees at the mission. He assisted with the building of a fort (Fort Wilhelm, named after the German Kaiser) at the mission station because of the continual fear of a Sekhukhune attack. Other small forts and rampart walls were built to ensure the safety of the mission station. A rondavel and a church were constructed and all these buildings can still be seen today at Botshabelo. A shop, a mill with a permanent miller, a book binding operation and a press, a wagon-making shop and a blacksmith’s shed were created by a missionary with vision and talent.

The refugees had suffered at the hands of Chief Sekhukhune. He had plundered their cattle and crops. When they arrived at the mission in February it was already too late in the season to plant.

With detailed planning and their faith in God, according to historians, the mission and its refugees survived. Thus did Botshabelo become a home to those who had fled their chief and his tyranny. Merensky trained and schooled them. Under the mission’s tutelage, these refugees learnt to make wagons, they became cabinet makers, and they learnt to make bricks and to build. A school was built and the refugees were taught to read and write and were instructed in Gospel teachings.

The Claimants

The descendants of these refugees are now claiming Botshabelo. They say because they were born there, they have an historical right to the mission station, its land and its improvements. Undeterred by the fact that their forefathers survived because of the charity and concern of the German missionaries, these claimants are adamant the land is historically theirs. They have claimed the land under Section 11A (2) of the Restitution of Land Rights Act, 1994, as amended.

Their claim form states that they were forcibly removed in January 1972 to the Motetema area and that their “houses were demolished and we were paid no compensation and received no land”.

This is not true. Lengthy negotiations between the then government’s representatives and the claimants took place, they were paid compensation and they received alternative living quarters.

The reason for their removal was because, at the time, mission stations were the collectors of homeless people who became in actual fact voluntary squatters.

Whether one agrees with the then government’s policy of removal or not, the point remains that the claimants were not the owners of the land upon which they squatted, nor did they have any historical/tribal claim to the land. They were at the mission station at the grace and favour of the missionaries.

In a document dated 8 September 2003, the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights, Mpumalanga (CRLR) says that the claimants are the direct descendants of the original “buyers of the farm”. But those who sought refuge at the mission station, and their children, never bought the farm.

The CRLR also says that the community was dispossessed of the “beneficial rights to land, which include occupational rights”. In law, occupying land at that time did not give people legal title to the land.

(The Commission states they were removed in 1959, while the claimants say 1972. Whatever date applies, they had no rights to the land. The land was never transferred to them by the mission society. They simply lived there until they were moved.)

The Early Mission

The early mission’s reputation spread far and wide. More and more people came to be converted, many it was felt because it was a safe place to stay and find work. In 1868 a bigger church building was commenced. It was added to and in 1871, the larger building was consecrated. By 1873, there were 1315 people living at Botshabelo. The mission station was at one time bigger than Middelburg, which was founded in 1864.

After Merensky’s return to Germany in 1882, he was replaced by others from the Berlin Missionary Society. Botshabelo became known as a witness to Christian teaching. It became a place for the propagation of Christian faith!

Many residents of Middelburg, taxpayers whose forefathers contributed to the upkeep and growth of Botshabelo, ask why this historical site (which attracts over 2 000 visitors per week) should now be handed over to a group of people whose forefathers happened to be born on the land because of the compassion of the missionaries. . It is not traditional tribal land. It never was in the hands of the claimants’ forefathers. They did not develop Botshabelo. They lived from it. For many Christians, Botshabelo represents something of a holy place, a place which was a refuge for Christians escaping certain death at the hands of Sekhukhune’s impis. Even the name implies this – Botshabelo means “a place of refuge”.

In 1972, the city council of Middelburg purchased Botshabelo and it has become a world-renowned tourist attraction. It was in the process of being declared a National Heritage Site, but the land claim stopped this process in its tracks. The land claim was contested by Dr. Klaus Merensky, great grandson of Alexander Merensky. His parents and the children of Alexander Merensky were buried in

Botshabelo's graveyard. He asked the Middelburg municipality, the owners of Botshabelo, to remove the graves at their cost.

The land claim should never have even been considered by the government, said Dr. Merensky. It never belonged to any tribal leader. His letter to the head of the Land Claims Commission (LCC), Adv. Wallace Mgoqi, was ignored.

In a letter dated 8 September 2003 inviting people to celebrate the handover of what the LCC calls the Groenfontein Ramohlakane land claim, the Commission on the Restitution of Land Rights outlines what it calls "the history of dispossession". (Groenfontein is one of the seven farms surrounding Botshabelo).

The Commission declares the claimants were forcibly removed from their land in 1959 in terms of the Land Act of 1936, and that the farm Groenfontein is one of the farms that Alexander Merensky of the Berlin Missionary Society purchased in January 1871.

A party for the claimants and their friends was held (at taxpayer's expense) on 17 September 2003 to celebrate the handover of the 600 ha Groenfontein farm, bought by the Department of Land Affairs for the sum of R1 750 000 (again, with taxpayers' money!). The statistical information provided on the invitation says the beneficiaries will be 3 200 people or 400 households. This is an average of 1,25 ha per family.

Groenfontein

What will happen to the farm Groenfontein? Let us examine what happened to another farm which formed part of the same Botshabelo claim.

Our researchers visited the farm Leeupoortjie, in extent 428 ha which, according to the Government Gazette Notice 2233 of 1998, belonged to F.J. and J.D. van der Bank. At the time of handover around two years ago, the farm ran 400 head of beef and dairy cattle, a dairy and some mixed farming. The improvements were in excellent condition.

"We came to the farm in the afternoon", said the researchers. "Three black men sat on tree stumps, smoking. We asked for the boss, and they said he's not here. But we live and work here, they advised. What do you do, we asked. Where are all the cattle?"

The farm property was in disarray. There was no sign of any cattle farming whatsoever. The buildings were decrepit, and the dairy was broken and rusted, while manure more than two years old still lay on the floor.

The cattle pens were broken, and the lighting had been vandalized. A few diseased cows and sheep walked past. The animals were thin.

We were told by a friend who accompanied us the cattle had not been dipped and looked like they had TB. The throats of the sheep were full of worms. We felt desperately sorry for these animals as they struggled along.

Nothing was happening on that farm, paid for with taxpayer's money. The "owner" was nowhere to be seen, while the three workers were clearly just living there and looking after their own poor cattle. There was no sign of a crop or ploughing.



The broken dairy pens at a non-functional dairy – the farm Leeupoortjie, Botshabelo, after the handover.

We moved along to the next farm. We cannot mention the name because the owner is being terrorized off his property. His farm has been claimed as part of the Botshabelo claim. A member of his family had been killed two weeks before we telephoned him. He was afraid to talk to us, and understandably so. This is today's rural South Africa. The farmer has not received a penny for his farm, but he cannot live on it because of the terror and intimidation. It has a dairy on it worth R1 million, and possesses an underground reservoir containing more fresh water than the Loskop Dam.

It is clear he will have to accept what the government decides to give him, if they give him anything at all. After all, why should they? He'll probably leave the property anyway, as have farmers in other parts of South Africa who have been driven off their land.

His farm is next to a huge squatter camp of the same name, which developed on a piece of government property. There had been very little water there, and the original 400 000 squatters were moved off this property. They were given better land, and some were paid out. The water on the property was just enough for washing, and for this reason the pre-1994 government used the land as a training camp for certain government departments.

In 1996, the government training camp was closed down, and the original squatters returned. According to a source, this move was initiated by the Department of Land Affairs. Nobody knows why the squatters came back, but they have disrupted the whole neighboring farming community, including the farmer next door. His family was intimidated to such a degree that he moved them off his farm into town. .

The squatter camp was like all squatter camps in South Africa, a desolate, filthy place. Dead animals lay around, their corpses decomposing in the sun. We saw some water tanks in the distance. Clearly the government is bringing in water to an area upon which people should never have squatted in the first place.

Our local companion said bringing the squatters back – despite the fact they were paid out – was a political decision. Was it to frighten the surrounding farmers into selling, especially the farmer with the huge reservoir? It is not beyond the

realms of possibility, seeing as this type of rural terrorism exists all over South Africa. We were told that local warlords at the squatter camp were selling plots to Mozambicans, but this could not be confirmed.

What of the other farms handed over as part of the Botshabelo claim? Our researchers were told one farm went to the mother of the Mpumalanga Minister of Safety and Security, another to the chairperson of the local tourism board, while a third was taken by Mr. Richard Mphele of COSATU. This property is purported to be Broodboomkrans, a farm of 780 ha which belonged to a Mr. Koos Stals who managed a successful beef operation. The farm is now occupied by squatters.

Broodboomkrans was a forced sale, and the new occupants obtained a court interdict to prevent Mr. Stals from visiting his farm.

The *Middelburg Observer* reported on 31 October 2003 that the Mpumalanga MEC for Safety and Security Thabang Makwetla confirmed that he was part of the “successful claim” on Botshabelo. The report also stated that the number of claimants and their dependants had risen to 1,200.

The Claim Itself

Local resident Arthur Barlow, chairman of the Mpumalanga Heritage Foundation, the curator of Fort Merensky (a declared historical monument), has repeatedly requested the ID numbers and addresses of the claimants from the chairman of the Land Claims Commission in Nelspruit, to no avail. The *Middelburg Observer* has also tried to obtain the details, with no reply. All the claimants say they are descendants of those born on the farm, but no I/D numbers or other personal details are supplied. (For his trouble, Barlow was severely beaten up outside his door one night, and told to “keep your nose out of Botshabelo’s business”).

The claimants were assisted by the Johannesburg-based Legal Resources Center who are in turn financed by the Ford Foundation of America. The complete history of the apportioning and sub-dividing of the original mission statement is set out, but nowhere does it state that Botshabelo and its satellite farms belonged historically to the claimants. The Botshabelo site was never tribal land. One portion which was purchased by a Mr. Jeremiah Makuse and eight other blacks on 7 November 1925 is declared in the Legal Resources Center report No. 9 of 1995 “to have never been part of the Mission Station area as it was now held in private ownership”. It was sold to the state.

All the other portions were either sold to the state, to the Middelburg municipality or to private persons or companies.



The new owners of Leeupoortjie, a handover under the Botshabelo claim.

What Now For Botshabelo?

The mission farm is nearly 3000 ha in size. An airfield valued at R14 million lies within the property – the longest airstrip in Mpumalanga. The council now pays R800 a month to lease this airport. There is a well-developed tourist apparatus on the farm, with overnight accommodation, a caravan park and restaurants.

The cycad *lanatis* is endemic to the area – it only exists in that part of the world. It has been registered in the International Flora and Fauna catalogue but already most of these ancient trees have been uprooted and sold.

There are walking trails and over R1,5 million worth of game on the farm. More than 176 species of birds have been identified, as well as a large variety of prehistoric cycads. The farm itself is a living museum, with artifacts over 150 years old. Antique furniture, books and other objects were a priceless addition to the complex, but already articles of value and furniture have been stolen. This precipitated the removal of most of the valuables which were returned to their owners. These artifacts were naturally an integral part of the historical value of the site, and have now been lost to the visiting public.

The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) wrote to Mr. Arthur Barlow in January 2003 concerning repairs and maintenance needed for Fort Merensky. SAHRA advised the Middelburg Municipality at the same time that Botshabelo qualified for National Heritage Status, but that it – SAHRA – was concerned at burglaries which were already taking place at the Merensky Parsonage (House Museum). Burglar bars should be installed, said SAHRA, and that small objects should be stored in a safe place. (A sign of things to come, hence the fear of many about the future of Botshabelo under the claimants' charge!)

In May 2003, SAHRA wrote to the COSATU claimant Mr. Richard Mphele, secretary of the Botshabelo Communal Property Association (CPA). They advised that a conservation policy document had been prepared for Botshabelo, and that the CPA's written consent was needed to declare Botshabelo a Heritage Site. SAHRA also expressed its concern about the "forced entry and vandalism of the museum collection in the Merensky House".

To date, according to sources, this written consent has not been forwarded to SAHRA. The reason is simple, say sources: if the CPA signs it before they move in, then they cannot move in! Occupying a heritage site means obeying the rules and restrictions imposed because your property is a heritage site. As transfer to the CPA has not yet taken place, it looks as if SAHRA's request for consent will not elicit the desired results.



The Botshabelo claim. The barren land of Doornkop, and in the distance, the squatter camp – previously farmland.

The Future

The Middelburg council has turned its back on maintaining Botshabelo, says Barlow. There has been no budget allocation for two years, and some of the game is diseased and is now inter-breeding. Furthermore, at a September 2003 Middelburg council meeting, it was resolved that the airfield would be leased to the council for R800 a year for ten years; that council could enter into a privatization agreement regarding the airfield; and that the “compensation received in respect of Botshabelo not be re-invested in the development of Botshabelo due to legislative prohibitions”.

It was also confirmed that the Industrial Development Program (IDP) would support Botshabelo for a period of five years in the first amount of R1 million, decreasing to R200,000, and that 40% of the game (valued at R1,5 million) be sold immediately, and that the CPA be permitted to sell “excess” game as determined by the Council in the future.

It was also resolved that the houses at Botshabelo be ceded to the CPA from date of registration of transfer. (There are purportedly 700 families ready to move into Botshabelo after transfer of title, but nobody knows the exact number of people planning to occupy the site). Where will they live?

Many Middelburgers fear for the future of Botshabelo. There is a story that someone is running around with a cheque for R14 million to build a casino near the airport. Nobody has seen a business plan for the running of the property and tourist sites, and there seem to be no government restrictions or guidelines in force about conserving the place as a heritage site.

A legal appeal to prevent the handover of Botshabelo is being considered. However, already the farms which were part of the claim have fallen into disarray. As a result, those who value Botshabelo and who paid for the site are justifiably worried at what will happen to this important piece of South African history and heritage.

Middelburg municipality is now under the control of the ANC, and although this municipality bought Botshabelo in 1972, the new council (the present owners) did not oppose the land claim. A local newspaper lamented the passivity and couldn't care less attitude of the town council vis a vis the future of Botshabelo. A *Middelburg Observer* report in February 2002 confirmed that the chairman of the CPA Ms. Miza Ranthla wants to farm with pigs, while the Middelburg Council mayor Clr. Mathlakeng Mahlangu said Botshabelo could be turned into a place like the Lost City (at Sun City).

Ms. Ranthla also declared that when the land is in their possession, they will "look for donations" to ensure that their pig, crop and flower farming will flourish. The Council is expected to continue financially supporting Botshabelo.