

THE SCORCHED EARTH POLICY OF LAND GRABBING

Landgrabs: The plight of farmers

Northam – Northam is a small town located in Limpopo province of South Africa, a closely-knit community characterised mainly by mining and agricultural and game farming. The farming community in Northam is subject to the latest spat of illegal landgrabs in South Africa. Section 25 of the country's constitution is in the process of being amended, which would allow the government to lay claim on any land when and where they see fit without compensation. In Northam, a group of approximately 30 men and

women who don't want to wait their turn, decided to lay claim to a farm in Koedoesdoorn, about 1 kilometre outside of Northam on Sunday 5 August. They planted their flags and demarcated the land they wanted. They also set fire to the surrounds. Soon the fire engulfed everything in its path. The wicked August winds helped the fire, which was more than two stories high at some places to jump the fence to two neighbouring farms, farm Meerkat and portion 17 of farm De Put. Water pipes and electric cables leading to these farms were destroyed in the process.

The community who immediately came to help fight the fire, were stunned to find illegal landgrabbers on the piece of land. They were met with mockery and sarcasm. Some of the landgrabbers went out of their way to provoke community members, cursing, shouting and showing signs as they were trying to prevent a catastrophe.

Having a lot to deal with, the community members did not have time to respond to the landgrabbers. They just did what they came to do... trying to stop the fire from spreading. They were able to save two farm

houses from burning to the ground.

However, the game and other farm animals on the three farms were not so fortunate. Over 500 hectares were laid to waste leaving a gloomy picture of dead animals among the ashes. Most of the burnt animal carcasses were found at the edges of the high game fences where they unsuccessfully tried to escape. The few animals that somehow managed to live through this fiery ordeal are now left without any food or water. The water of all the different small natural dams dried up and the farmers would now have to cart water and fodder to the few surviving animals. Seven suspects were arrested by the police, led by lieutenant colonel Ngoepe. South African farmers face a dark, depressing and uncertain future.

"What happened here today is inhumane, to the farmers and the animals. I earn an honest living by the sweat of my brows. Like other farmers, I work every day from dawn till dusk to make a living and look after the animals. My piece of land used to be my pride and joy, now I feel trapped and I do not know what tomorrow holds. We can't sell our property. Many black citizens await their promised land, and white citizens are losing their basic human right to protect and own their property. They are soon going to be told to

stand back, losing their property to expropriation without compensation. We are entering a turbulent, political property climate in South Africa," said one of the community members who wishes to stay anonymous for fear of reprisal, in an interview with the *Platinum Bushvelde* newspaper. Our reporters tried to interview some of the landgrabbers, but the only direct communication was: "F... you, this land is ours!"

Another community member at the scene, also wanting to stay anonymous, added: "We feel threatened and we have nowhere to go."

Sunday 5 August will not be forgotten soon. Although farmers in the direct vicinity was alerted and within minutes hordes of people showed up to help, the elements were against them.

The entire operation was led by Chris Liebenberg of the Thabazimbi Fire Protection Association, leader of the Northam section. "I thank the various organisations and community members who assisted us today. I commend and thank the farmers, the Swartklip Fire Department, the Thabazimbi Fire Protection Association, Thabazimbi Crisis Control Centre, Amandelbult Fire Department, Northam Working on Fire, and all the community members who braved the fire to help save the lives of humans and animals," said Chris in an interview with the *Platinum Bushvelde*.

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It took the might of many community members to bring this fire under control.



The burnt carcass of a Springbuck.

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