

Five farms handed back to a community that was dispossessed by apartheid

# Murder farm handed to landless

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STEPHAN HOFSTATTER

**BOOMZIEN FARM** — A giant packing shed in northern Limpopo became the venue for a historic signing ceremony this weekend which saw five farms handed back to a community dispossessed under apartheid.

The entire political spectrum of land reform was represented. Regal Land Affairs Minister Thoko Didiza shared the stage with firebrand chief land claims commissioner Tozi Gwanya, as well as local and regional government dignitaries.

The shed was crowded with a motley assortment of Marobala clansmen and women, their traditional leaders, and representatives of a rural NGO and the Landless Peoples' Movement — both bodies highly critical of the government's land reform policies.

At the rear sat a group of white farmers and their wives. They had come to witness the end of an era in a district notorious for racial intolerance. Some had sold their land willingly; others felt they were victims of a political process they opposed.

But their grievances became a footnote

to history in the making.

"Never again shall this beautiful land witness the pain inflicted on a people ... subjected to slavery or racially motivated crimes such as the murder of Tshepo Matloga," thundered district mayor JG Mothudi to rapturous applause.

Matloga was kicked and punched to death by Northern Province rugby players on a "team building" camp held on the neighbouring farm Inderhiken, one of the five being handed over. Many locals see it as poetic justice.

The Marobala were forced into feudal servitude on their ancestral land by white farmers who demanded four months free labour for residence rights. A racist murder in the early 1960s prompted a mass exodus. Many lost their livestock and were reduced to abject poverty in a crowded township nearby.

Winning back this blood-soaked land became symbolic redress for Matloga's murder and all it represented.

Racist expletives remain an everyday occurrence in the streets of nearby Polokwane, where blacks are made to feel unwelcome in Northerns watering



**SIGN OF THE TIMES:** The farm on which Tshepo Matloga was killed.

hole the Castle Bar.

Crowds chanted "Kill the Boer, kill the farmer" at race riots that broke out during the trial of Matloga's murderers, who included the son of a farmer at the back of the hall.

The signing ceremony, therefore, represented more than the handover of title to land — it became a victory over racial oppression everywhere.

"People can now walk on their own land without the fear of being murdered," said Gwanya, expressing a widely held view.

"The hungry can have food to eat, the homeless somewhere to live. All can walk freely now in the streets of Pretoria, Cape Town and Polokwane without fear of being arrested for not carrying a dompas."

Didiza also made it plain that those opposed to restitution could be subject to an expropriation law signed last week. "We will pray for them that their hearts may be softened ... but we can't negotiate endlessly," she said, referring to four farmers in the district resisting the sale of their land, one implacably opposed to it.

But reconciliation was the dominant theme. Didiza and Gwanya both made conciliatory gestures to white landowners. Community leader Frans Mathopa urged farmers to "work together with us, but don't rob and exploit us again."

Farmer John Vogel, who will lease part of his land from the community and stay to offer expertise and commercial partnership, took the podium to welcome the audience "to this farming community", ending his awkward speech with a Sotho proverb: "There are no problems, the rains are coming."



**SAAMBOU:** Johnny Vogel (a landowner) and Frans Mathopa (the Marobala community leader) in the large packaging shed at Boomzien farm in Dendron, Limpopo.

PICTURE: STUART LOWMAN

## THE FACTS

- **Total size:**  
7 147 hectares (five farms)
- **Total land cost:**  
R18.5 million (R4 million paid for Inderhiken)
- **Total government grants:**  
R1.9 million
- **Total number of beneficiaries:**  
1 500
- **Appelfontein:** commercial potato and cattle farming (new owners plan to expand production)

## Marobala Land Claim Settlement

- **Boomzien:** commercial potato and cattle farming (new owners plan to introduce maize and cabbage)
- **Combrow:** commercial potato and cattle farming (new owners plan to introduce garlic and cotton)
- **Inderhiken:** game farming (new owners negotiating with existing clients to continue hunting there and plan to introduce more game)
- **Potsdam:** potato, dairy and poultry farming (new owners negotiating to buy dairy and broiler house)



# 'First they took my son, then my game and now my farm'

STEPHAN HOFSTATTER

INDERHIKEN, Limpopo — "Let's just get one thing straight," barks Nick Botha, striding across his manicured lawn to greet me with a vigorous handshake. "I didn't invite you to my home."

The Bothas aren't talking to the press. Not since their son murdered a black poacher on their game farm, which led to race riots in nearby Polokwane. "They called this 'Murder farm,'" says his wife, Elsie. "How is a mother supposed to feel about that?"

With these pleasantries out the way we switch to more contemporary topics.

That morning a cavalcade of government bigwigs roared up to their doorstep for a speech and photo opportunity. The Botha farm was one of five being handed back to the community, which lost their ancestral land under apartheid, and Tshepo Matloga's murder here at the hands of white rugby thugs lends it special significance.

The Bothas were informed almost two years ago that there was a claim on their land.

"It was a shock for me," concedes Elsie, whose family has owned the farm for five generations. "But I accept we must move on."

Despite putting on a brave face, Saturday's land hand-over ceremony on a neighbouring farm clearly has rubbed salt in the wound.

"First my son was taken from me, then my farm, then my game and now my cattle," says Elsie. "They've taken away everything I loved most."

Nick doubts the new owners can farm



**LAND HAND-OVER:** Nic and Elise Botha of Inderhiken farm in Dendron.

sustainably. "My greatest wish is that they don't ruin this place," he says. "It's happened in Natal, the Free State and the Northern Cape. You can't give land to people with no farming experience. Just look at Zimbabwe."

He hastens to add he's not comparing this morning's events to what happened to our northern neighbour.

In fact, the new landowners already have business plans on the table. Earlier that afternoon community leader Frans Mathopa elaborated.

Much of the land is used for large-scale commercial potato farming. "We want to scale up production," he says, by bulk-buying seed and fertiliser and sharing equipment and marketing costs with former landowner John Vogel, who will remain on his farm.

Mathopa said he would continue farming game on the Botha land, but the community was not prepared to lease it to them. "They don't see Africans as people," said Mathopa.

# From young man with a future to destitute slave with nothing

**STEPHAN HOFSTATTER**

**BOOMZIEN FARM** — To this day Piet Matome can't believe how swiftly his fortune changed.

One day he was a young man with a future: he had eight cattle, 10 goats, six donkeys, and enough land to plough to support a family; the next he was left with nothing.

"The farmer came up to me and said: 'Your time has come. Vat jou goed en fokkof van hier [take your stuff and fuck off from here].'"

Like so many others driven from their ancestral land under apartheid, Matome's crime was refusing to become a slave. "The farmer said if I wanted to stay here I must work six months for free for him," says Matome, 79.

He declined. "The same day he took my cattle, opened the gate and chased me out. When I tried to resist he raised his fists and shouted: 'Ek sal jou dood skiet — loop! [I will shoot you — go].'"

Matome moved to a crowded reserve, where he built four huts for his wife and eight children. They lived off a tiny mealie patch dependent on variable rains.

"To this day, I could never afford to buy cattle again," he says. "To this day I have nothing."

That was over 40 years ago. On Saturday the 79-year-old was back on his land. "Today I feel great," he says. "All I need

now is rain. Then I'll be able to plough and we can eat again."

Phineas Mosegi, 70, tells a similar tale.

"When the white people came here we were living happily, but they told us every household must pay a tax of four pounds ten."

Those who didn't have cash had to pay in kind — usually a bag of maize.

"One day I was working in the mealie field when the farmer's son came up to me and said 'from now on you work for me for free for four months.'"

When Mosegi refused he was told to go. "He came every day, beating people, telling us to leave. So we moved," he says meditatively.

Albert Mogawa, 75, feared the wrath of his feudal overlord even when he was working on a mine in Johannesburg. He was 33 when he ran away from the farm rather than submit to slave labour. "The mealies were high in the fields, but I didn't even tell my mother or father because I knew they'd want to keep me here," he says.

He didn't dare write home for fear the farmer would alert the police he had left his home district without a "trekpass".

Like a serf bonded to her owner, Matshene Malekane was driven off the land when the farmer sold and left. "We asked him where we should go and he just said: loop! [go]." At 80 she feels too old to move again, but this is a new beginning for her 52-year-old son.