How long still?

The reality of farm murders in South Africa

A report to the United Nations' Forum for Minority Affairs

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Introduction

> *"Listen to me when I hand you this volume. I'm not giving it to you because I am white. I'm giving it to you because I am a South African and because you have a responsibility to protect all South Africans – including farmers."*

These were the words of Belinda van Noord to Colonel Simon Chabangu, Secretary to the Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, on 17 January 2013. In her hands she held a red folder. In the red folder were one hundred letters, written by victims of farm attacks. A mere week before, Belinda had to bury her brother. Her father was also buried not long before that. Both were shot to death in cold blood in their farm butchery near Brits, in the North West Province of South Africa.

Little did Belinda know that the Minister of Police had already released a media statement before the letters were presented to him. In his media statement of 17 January 2013 he described Belinda's attempt to persuade him to draw up a counter-strategy for farm murders as a mere "publicity stunt" which could not be taken seriously and should be condemned.[1]

Farm murders have become a cold reality in South Africa – a reality that has already been faced by thousands of people, the majority of whom are members of a minority group known as Afrikaners.[2] The agricultural community is under great pressure as a result of farm attacks and farm murders and the number of commercial farmers and employed farm workers are dropping rapidly.[3]

This trend affects the whole of South Africa.

Why should farm murders be regarded as a unique crime requiring a unique intervention?

Farm murders are in fact different from "normal crimes", as the Minister's Spokesperson, Zweli Mnisi, prefers to put it. There are four reasons why:

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[1] Media statement by the Ministry of Police, 13 January 2013.

[2] Also referred to as "Boere" (Afrikaans), "Boers" (English) or "AmaBhunu" (Zulu).

[3] According to Statistics South Africa Africa's Census of Commercial Agriculture, there were 32 375 commercial farmers (i.e. people running farming operations either full-time or part-time) in South Africa in 2007. This number has dropped from over 60 000 in 1992 according to Agricultural Union TAU SA. (Statistics South Africa, *Census of Commercial Agriculture: Financial and production statistics*, Report No. 11-02-01 (2007), (accessed 9 November 2012), Table 8.1, 48). It was confirmed by the Department of Agriculture, which also stated that the number of commercial farmers has dropped by more than 50% since 1996. (How the ANC Govt de-prioritised the fight against farm attacks. Johan Burger).The number of people employed on commercial farms in South Africa dropped from 1,1 million in 1993 to 796 806 in 2007 (Press Release by the South African Institute of Race Relations, "Number of farmworkers plummets", 26 January 2011). Amalgamated Bank of Southern Africa (ABSA)'s head of agribusiness, Ernst Janovsky, predicts that the number of commercial farmers will decline to 15 000 individuals over the next fifteen years, causing significant job losses in rural areas (Johan Burger "farm attacks remain a concern" 17 October 2012 (Published by the Institute for Security Studies)

1. Unique frequency

   The exact frequency of farm murders is a subject which is often hotly debated because the South African Government has deliberately curtailed the release of any official statistics on farm murders. Previously these statistics were included in police crime reports, but during 2007 farm attacks increased by about 25%, after which Government took a decision that no further statistics on the matter will be released.[4]

   Acknowledging the lack of sufficient data, the leading South African authority on crime research, the Institute for Security Studies, made a conservative calculation in 2012, which put the level of farm murders at 98,8 per 100 000 murders per annum.[5] In 2013, the number was recalculated, using newer data. The number was put at 120 per 100 000 per year.

   It is noteworthy that the number of murders on farmers is more than twice as high as the murder rate of police officials in South Africa, which is put at 54 per 100 000 per year.[6] This is already more than four times the South African murder average, which is one of the highest in the world at 31 per 100 000 per year, and 17 times the world murder average, which is put at about 7 per 100 000 per year.[7]

2. Unique levels of brutality

   The extreme brutality of farm murders is in most cases totally unrelated to the value of the items stolen in such attack, leading one to suspect that robbery is often not the motive in these crimes. On 16 December 2010, for instance, Johan Schoeman, an 86 year old farmer from the North West province, was tied behind is pickup truck and dragged over a farm road until he died from a burst liver. On 1 December 2010 the Potgieter family was killed on their farm in the Free State Province. Attie Potgieter (40) was stabbed 151 times while his wife, Wilna (36) and daughter, Wilmien (2) witnessed the killing. Thereafter, little Wilmien was executed in front of her mother and thrown in a box. During the clean-up of the crime scene, the body was found floating in blood that half-filled the box. After witnessing the brutal murder of her husband and daughter, Wilma was then also executed. On 22 October 2013 Dawid en Rallie de Villiers (both 87) were murdered on their farm in the Eastern Cape Province. The attacker(s) wrote “666” on the walls in the victims' blood. Their son, Dawie (53) was also on the scene. His eyes were gouged out and a machete (a sharp-edged blade) was left in his throat. He survived. These references serve as examples. It is possible to quote many similar incidents which left even hardened crime investigators reeling.

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[4] Johan Burger *“*From Rural Protection to Rural Safety: How government changed its priorities*”* in Report by the Solidarity Research Institute *An overview of farm attacks in South Africa and the potential impact thereof on society* November 2012, pages 60 – 61.

[5] *Ibid* 62.

[6] Considering that South Africa's murder rate is almost five times higher than the international average, one can expect that the levels of police killings would be quite high. Policing is a high risk occupation. Farming, however, isn’t and the fact that it is more dangerous to be a South African farmer than a South African policeman raises serious concerns.

[7] *Beeld* newspaper “Boere het meer risiko’s as polisie: Dit is dalk Malema se skuld" [Farmers at bigger risk than police – perhaps Malema is to blame] – *TLU SA”* 24 October 2013.

In fact, the levels of violence and the inexplicable need of attackers to torture their victims is a cause for grave concern.[8] The well-known South African "Blood Sisters" from the company Crime Scene Clean-up have dedicated a chapter in their book on South African crime scenes on farm murders.[9] In it they state that the expression "farm murders" is misleading. According to these individuals, who have dealt with all kinds of violent crime, including hits ordered by organized crime, "farm torture" or "farm terror" would be more appropriate.

3. Farmers' role in the South African community

   South Africa is an agriculturally rich country, ensuring employment of thousands of workers in rural areas where employment opportunities are scarce. The State President has repeatedly stated that job security and job creation should be on the top of Government's agenda. Farmers are employers and play an important role in terms of job creation, food security and the economy.

4. Unique circumstances

   The most important motivation for the AfriForum campaign for the prioritization of farm murders, however, is the fact that farmers live in unique circumstances. Farms are isolated, far from towns and often only accessible by gravel roads. Intervention by the local police and even by concerned neighbours cannot take place within a matter of minutes. The circumstances of farmers certainly cannot be compared to that of citizens living in urban areas. It is a basic policing principle that unique crimes require unique counter-strategies.

Volatile political climate

Farmers have also unfortunately become easy targets of electioneering politicians trying to win the support of the unemployed poor by suggesting that access to land will cure the country's economic woes. It has become a popular pastime of leaders of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), to abuse public platforms for the purpose of launching verbal attacks on South African farmers. A few of the many examples are included here.

- During 1993, then President of the ANC Youth League, Peter Mokaba, became known for his repeated singing of a song in which the words "Kill the Boer, kill the Farmer" are chanted. In July 2003 the song was declared by the South African Human Rights Commission to be hate speech.

- On 8 May 2011 his successor, Julius Malema, stated during an election campaign (and with particular reference to white farmers) that "white people are criminals and should be treated as such". This statement was made in the presence of the President of South Africa (and of the ANC), Jacob Zuma. Malema was neither reprimanded nor contradicted.[10]

[8] Lorraine Claassen *"*Investigating the psychological aftermath of farm attacks*"* in Report by the Solidarity Research Institute *An overview of farm attacks in South Africa and the potential impact therof on society.* November 2012, page 39

[9] Eileen de Jager and Roelien Schutte. *Blood Sisters.* (LAPA Publishers, 21 May 2012).

[10] Note that Malema's expulsion from the ANC in the following year was in response to his public criticism of Zuma and not for his remarks about white people or farmers.

- In 2011 Malema was charged with hate speech, for his repeated singing of another so-called struggle song called *Dubula iBhunu* (directly translated as "Shoot the Boer").[11] In court, Malema's singing of the song was officially supported by the ruling ANC Government.[12]

- On 5 June 2012, the Deputy President of the ANC Youth League, Ronald Lamola, stated in a public speech that farmers should give up their land voluntarily and that the safety of what he referred to as "the Van Tonders and the Van der Merwes" (two common Afrikaans surnames) cannot be guaranteed as long as they refused to hand over their land to black South Africans. A few hours later, Arina Muller (29) was shot point blank on her family smallholding just a few kilometres from where Lamola had made the statement.

- Most recently, the Deputy President of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, warned disillusioned voters at an election rally that they had to vote for the ANC, stating that the "Boers" would come back to rule over them if they didn't do so. This derogatory reference to fellow South Africans exposed Mr Ramaphosa as a racially biased individual and fuelled racial tension in South Africa.

The deprioritization of farm murders

Despite an increase in calls for drastic action, the South African Government has gradually yet deliberately deprioritized farm murders over the last two decades.[13]

- In 1997 the South African Government stated officially that farmers appeared to be uniquely targeted in violent and murderous attacks. Statistics on farm murders were released annually and Government even appointed a task team with the aim of compiling a plan to deal with farm attacks.

- In 1999 the Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure Priority Committee was convened with the aim of escalating rural safety to national priority.

- In 2001 the Minister of Police directed the SAPS National Commissioner to establish a Committee of Inquiry into farm attacks.

- In 2003 former President Thabo Mbeki announced against all expectations that the commando system would be abolished. The ruling ANC argued that this system, which provided a platform for members of the agricultural community to become involved with safety initiatives in rural South Africa, represented the security interests of the white farming community only.[14] Mbeki stated that the structure would be replaced by a structure which would

[11] See http://www.saflii.org/cgi-bin/disp.pl?file=za/cases/ZAEQC/2011/2.html&query=AfriForum.
[12] The ANC and Malema filed an appeal against the judgment. Before reaching the Supreme Court of Appeals, the matter was settled when both the ANC and Malema agreed that they would refrain from singing the song again and would encourage the members of the ANC to also refrain from singing the song.
[13] See Johan Burger "farm attacks remain a concern" 17 October 2012 (Institute for Security Studies) as well as Johan Burger "From Rural Protection to Rural Safety: How government changed its priorities" in Report by the Solidarity Research Institute *An overview of farm attacks in South Africa and the potential impact thereof on society* November 2012, pages 64 – 65.
[14] Various black South Africans were, however, also involved with the commando system.

be controlled by the police (this promised has to this day not been fulfilled). Statistics on farm murders were, however, still released.

- Shortly after the abolition of the commandos, farm attacks and farm murders rose sharply. By 2007 attacks on farms had escalated by almost 25%. The reaction of the Minister of Police was that no further statistics on farm murders would be released and that a new “Rural Safety Strategy” would be implemented. According to this policy farm murders were, in spite of the sharp increase, officially no longer a priority.

While the South African Government is not prepared to prioritize farm murders, many other unique crimes have been prioritized. Examples of these are rhino poaching, theft of copper cables, gang-related violence and violence against women and children. While we fully support the prioritizing of the mentioned crimes, farm murders have a much larger impact on the South African society.

A call to the United Nations

AfriForum has been campaigning nationally for the prioritising of farm murders and will continue to do so. AfriForum is also involved with various community-based safety initiatives across the country and has noted that community involvement in crime prevention can have a major impact on the reduction of crime.

The South African Government, however, is still refusing to take proper action against this very disturbing crime which impacts significantly on minority communities in the country.

We hereby call on the international community and the United Nations to assist the South African farmers by confronting the South African Government about its uncaring attitude towards the brutal killing of a significant part of its own citizenry.