

# ICWA LETTERS

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4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

TCY-10 1998  
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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## So Much Easier

PIETERSBERG, South Africa

MARCH 1998

By Teresa C. Yates

The people who live on Bosch Farm<sup>1</sup> are not very different from those in other communities I have written about in previous newsletters. They are poor, they have lived on the same land all of their lives, and they are threatened with eviction from that land.

So I didn't expect the meeting, called to inform community residents about recent discussions with the farm owner and to discuss options for land reform, to be any different from the scores of other similar meetings I've attended during the past two years.

Present were members of the local government, the 50 people who live on the farm, people who once lived on the land but who had been forced to leave, a representative from the Northern Province office of the national Department of Land Affairs, facilitators from the Nkuzi Development Association (the only land-reform NonGovernmental Organization in the Province) — and a white farmer from a neighboring farm.

A white farmer? My first thought was that he must be there to cause trouble.

The meeting started with introductions and a speech from Mr. Morele, a member of the local-government Council. Morele explained how he had learned about the people living on Bosch Farm. Residents of the farm, he said, came to the Council office with complaints that the owner of the farm, a Mr. LaRoux, had told them that they had to leave within 30 days. Morele went to see LaRoux and was told that it was time "for these people to move."

Morele said that he'd asked LaRoux to consider "the rights of the people, and the government's policies and laws." LaRoux was adamant: If they were not off in 30 days, he said, he would come with a bulldozer and destroy their houses.

Morele contacted the Nkuzi Development Association for assistance. I joined a delegation consisting of Marc Wegerif (Director of Nkuzi), Morele and another Council member, two residents of the farm, and an Nkuzi field representative, Them bani Furamela, to meet with LaRoux and his lawyer, a Mr. Steyn. LaRoux and Steyn said that they would not meet with the entire group; the only people they were prepared to talk with were the two residents of the farm, along with Wegerif and Furamela. The rest of us went to a cafe to wait.

The others returned about 45 minutes later. Wegerif said that LaRoux was very hostile at the beginning of the meeting and insisted that he wanted the people off of his farm. If they did not move by the end of the month, he repeated, he was going to tear down their houses.

Wegerif said that he'd explained to LaRoux that there was new legislation that pre-

<sup>1</sup> The farm is approximately 70 miles northeast of Pietersburg.

vented him from forcing these people off of the land (see TCY-8). He warned LaRoux that if he went ahead with the eviction he was going to have to pay a lot of money to Mr. Steyn to defend against an unlawful-eviction lawsuit. He said that the people had been on that land for many years and had a legal right to stay where they were.

LaRoux got very angry, Wegerif said, slamming his fist on the table and screaming, "But what about *my* rights?!" LaRoux said that if he couldn't move the people off of the land, he would sell the farm.

Wegerif asked him how much the selling price would be. Steyn cautioned his client against making any firm decision about selling the farm, and told him that he was certain that he could legally evict the people from the farm even under the terms of the new legislation.

Wegerif warned LaRoux that even if he were legally able to evict the people from the farm the process would be long and the legal costs high.

LaRoux said that he was not interested in any long legal battle and that he would sell the farm to the people living there for 360,000 Rand (U.S.\$120,000).

Which brings us to the meeting at Bosch Farm.

When Councilman Morele finished his presentation one old man stood up and asked, "Why should we buy this farm when the land belongs to us?"

Wegerif outlined the South African land-reform policy. Under its Redistribution Program, the national government had promised to provide grants to families wishing to purchase land, he said. For any household whose income was under R1,500 (U.S.\$300) per month, R15,000 (U.S.\$5,000) would be available.

Wegerif also explained the Land Restitution Program. If the people of the community had provable rights to the land after June 19, 1913 (the date of land-apportionment legislation passed by the post-Boer War Union government), and lost those rights as a result of discriminatory laws or practices of governments since then, they could put in a claim for restitution of the land. The process of proof and counter-proof, of argument and counter-argument, would take a long time.

An old woman wanted to know whether the government would give the community enough money to buy the Bosch farm. Jane Morena from the Department of Land Affairs explained that since there were only five families now living on the farm, R15,000 per household would not be enough to buy the land from LaRoux. Other families would have to be invited to participate in the redistribution project if they were going to buy the farm.

Another old man stood up and said that many families had previously been forced to leave the farm. The families still living on the farm know who left and where they are currently living. He said the people now living on Bosch farm would like to buy the farm with the

people who had once lived with them on the land.

The white farmer stood to speak. His name was Rolf Schlieben, he said, and he owned Rustentein, a neighboring farm. He then started to speak in Venda, the local indigenous language (and the name of the "homeland" for Venda-speaking people established by the Nationalist government under the apartheid system). He soon had most of the Bosch Farm residents nodding their heads in agreement as he spoke. He paused and said in English, "I've lived here for 40 years and I've never had a problem with my people. I came here from Germany. I worked hard and my work is mine. I know that I must respect the law and that we've got to live together, but if they [South African blacks] don't want me here I'll leave. I was born white, I can't change that."

One of the Councilors thanked Schlieben for his comments and for attending the meeting. He said that he believed that there was enough land in the country to allow all who wanted to make a living off of the land to do so, but there had to be cooperation between blacks and whites. No decision to buy or not to buy the Bosch Farm was taken. It all depended on finding additional purchasers.

When the meeting was finished I introduced myself to Schlieben and explained that I had been in the Northern Province nearly two years, writing about land reform. I told him that none of the dozens of white farmers that I had met would agree to talk to me about the government's land-reform policies. I asked if it might be possible for me to come to his farm and ask him a few questions.

He surprised me by not only agreeing, but also offering to invite other farmers from the area. He said that I should call him the following week to arrange the meeting time. When I phoned, however, he said that he had called four other farmers in the area and all of them had refused to speak to me. Three said they thought I must be a CIA spy and the fourth said that he had had a bad experience with a BBC reporter. Schlieben, however, was still pleased to talk to me. We would meet at his farm following day at lunchtime.

The next day I drove to the farm and was greeted by three very large (about the size of young bears), very ferocious dogs. A young man walked to up to the car with one of the dogs at his side and asked if he could help me.

I told him that I had an appointment with Rolf Schlieben. The young man said that Schlieben was his father and that he should be arriving soon. He advised me to stay in the car. I wondered if he thought that I looked stupid. There was no way I was going to offer myself to the bear dogs.

A woman came out of the house and approached the car. She was Schlieben's wife. She said that the dogs had been put away and that I could come into the house. On the way we passed the room where the dogs were locked. They were still barking, and I wondered how strong the door was.

The room Mrs. Schlieben led me to was next to the one with the dogs. I immediately looked around for a way out, just in case. The only way out was the way we came in. I tried to relax, but the sound of the dogs was unnerving.

Mrs. Schlieben offered me tea, and I accepted.

As she went out, I saw Schlieben's truck arrive. When he entered the house my greatest fear came true; he opened the door and let the dogs out. I kept telling myself not to scream, to remain calm. But the dogs were now running toward me. I was shaking, and I felt myself curling up inside and beginning to whimper. Schlieben came in after the dogs, shouted a command in German and the dogs immediately quieted down and retreated back into the other room. Schlieben shook my hand and apologized. He said the dogs were for security.

I thanked Schlieben for agreeing to talk to me and told him that I wanted to hear his impressions of the land reform program and the state of white farming generally. I warned him that I had been in South Africa for two years and that I had talked to many blacks who were being threatened with eviction or who had been forced off their land by the old government. He said that he had nothing to hide and that he was pleased that I wanted to hear his story.

What follows are Mr. Schlieben's comments, verbatim. I have decided not to characterize his words in any way:

"After 1902 whites came to these farms. The British had claimed the land and there was nobody here. The government gave land to soldiers who fought in the Anglo-Boer War. As far as I know this farm was in the hands of whites since 1908.

"You must understand what's worrying us. The Afrikaner is Christian. Hospitals and schools have been built by white church money. The basic principle has always been to do unto others as you do unto yourself. I am good to my workers. I give them warm water and electricity. They pay R60 for the rooms.

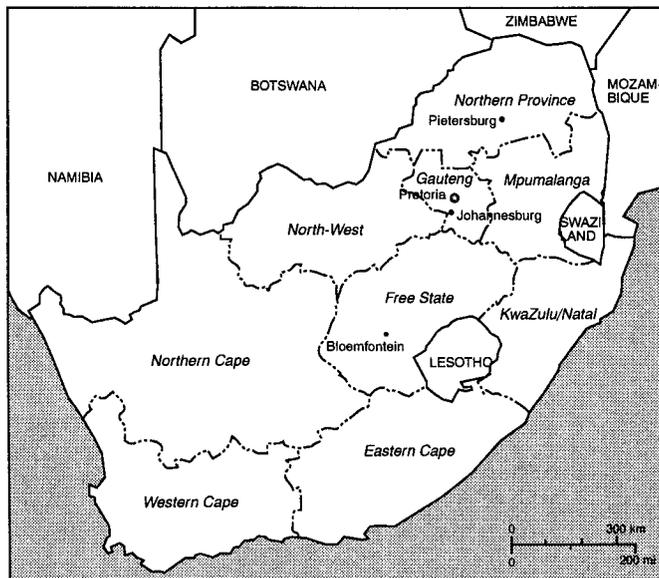
"I'm sick of all the rhetoric about the poor. If I'm put off my farm here, what do I do? In 1951 there were two families living on this land, the rest just came from the homelands — luckily we live close to the homelands. Now they want to own this land. You don't see any whites owning land in Venda. Everyone must own their own land and must learn to work for himself.

"The old government started the whole process, twenty years back, of buying land from white farmers and giving

it to blacks. The black man could not handle that. They are not successful farmers. Most white farmers are not against blacks having land, but we are against toy-toying [protest dancing] and claiming that this land is ours. That's not true.

"The ANC [African National Congress] will provide for the blacks just as the NP [National Party] did for the Afrikaner. The Afrikaner was oppressed [by English-speaking South Africans] in the '30s and '40s and that was rectified in 1948 when the NP came to power. It always works that way. History will repeat itself. That's the way it works, not by restitution, not by taking away.

"Why don't they start taking land in the former homelands? They should start with the land held by the Zulu king [in KwaZulu Natal]. I hope that whatever they do that it is orderly. There is lots of land in South Africa, lots of land in the homelands.



"In just over three years a black man can already afford a farm that costs R1.5 million. The more they get into power and earn more money, the more land they will buy. There is a lot of land.

"The previous owner of Bosch farm went bankrupt. LaRoux took money out of his own pocket and bought the land at public auction. Now the people living there want to buy the land. LaRoux won't invest in the farm now, he won't buy any capital equipment to work the farm. If one farmer

could not make a living, how do you expect 30 families to make a living?

"There is all this trouble because one old woman won't take her R15,000 grant and go to Njelele [a township in the former homeland of Venda about 50 miles from the Bosch farm] where there is electricity and running water. Now she has to stay in a mud house without water and electricity.

"Apartheid was better than the communist system that was forced on the rest of Africa. We didn't have the very [worst] poverty. They [the blacks] did get a chance to go school, they did have clothes and they did have a place to live. If the Boer weren't here the indigenous people would have been at each other's throat. The Zulus would have killed the Xhosas. Everything would have been so much easier."

He plainly meant every word.