

## **Improving working conditions, not wild rightwing threats, will improve safety in farms**

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“I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all.”

These opening lines from Tsitsi Dangarembga’s epic novel, *Nervous Conditions*, best depict how many of my facebook fellows felt when the news of Eugene Terre Blanche’s death broke.

Not that many rejoiced at the death of a fellow countryman. It is what the departed represented that illicit such ‘callousness’. One blogger opined “khokhela abasebenzi bakho ukuze izinsuku zakho zande emhlabeni”. Loosely translated, ‘pay your workers (on time and as per agreement) and you shall live longer’.

Now that ET is buried and tempers are beginning to taper, it is time society looked at and reconditioned the conditions that led to his death. Media reported that both murder suspects, a minor and a major, were aggrieved that ET owed them three months’ wages.

Assuming the court authenticates this claim, ET was killed because of a labour dispute. This on its own lends credence to widely held views that thousands of farm workers in South Africa work under sub-human conditions. Apart from toiling for pittance, they are often harassed, assaulted beaten, denied food, denied leave, denied access to basic necessities like healthcare and education etc. This over and above being routinely called baboons. Studies by NGOs like Umhlaba have corroborated government reports pointing to worse forms of labour relations and employment conditions in the farming sector.

The labour department recently reported that in over a thousand farms visited more than 50% did not meet minimum occupational health and safety requirements. That means thousands of workers work under dangerous conditions. To this, add insecurity of tenure, physical and verbal abuse as well as poor and irregular wages, you emerge with a toxic mix of angry workers and indifferent employers.

Although not conclusive, mounting evidence suggests that illegal immigrants are the new semi-slaves in the agricultural sector in South Africa. Their plight is exacerbated by general vulnerability in communities where they live. The rising number of farmer attacks in the Cape correlates with the propensity to employ and exploit illegal immigrants in those farms.

Speaking at the Moral Regeneration Movement conference last year, Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe observed: “... In fact some of the most brutal farm murders are committed by people who are foreign nationals who were brutally exploited; in fact made to labour and toil without any remuneration. The day they demand remuneration they are then reported to the law enforcement units, to be arrested and sent back to their countries

of origin. And of course when they come back, and as people who would have worked for some time on these farms, they no longer reconnoitre the farms. They know them inside out. They go back and commit the most horrendous of murders. So this is why we need to condemn those who take advantage of foreign nationals... I believe nothing ever justifies the exploitation of a person's vulnerability for selfish financial ends."

Instead of calling for a study of this nervous condition some in the farming sector employed human rights rhetoric and threatened to report the Deputy President to the human rights commission. This came to naught.

But how is child labour and sub-human employment arrangements possible in a country touted for labour-friendly laws? This is precisely what society needs to recondition as a partial contribution to efforts to improve safety and security in the farms. My view is that all stakeholders, especially organised labour, agriculture unions and human rights bodies, should work towards:

- Implementing the sectoral minimum wage as gazetted by government
- Setting up bargaining arrangements mirroring those of other difficult sectors
- Organising farm workers. The danger of having 90% of labour outside organised structures means neither they nor their employers can negotiate wages and working conditions under controlled and coordinated arrangements
- Engaging the CCMA and the labour department to set up a special arrangement to resolve pending disputes in the sector
- Building a culture of tolerance for diversity and human rights
- Improving internal and external communications so that people do not second-guess each other with devastating consequences

Further, these are small but vital steps towards helping the sector boost its contribution to food security, decent employment and the gross domestic product. They are however not a substitute for the speedy implementation of land reform. It's mere recognition that South Africa's agriculture sector has a potential to reclaim a pole position especially under current favourable conditions inspired by the mandating party's emphasis of rural development and the contribution of the agricultural sector to a better country.

So, whether callous, livid or sympathetic, feelings spurred by the murder of a man correctly characterised by international news channels to be a white supremacist should not divert attention from the urgent task of addressing the working conditions of farm workers. Citizenship status and level of employment notwithstanding, all farm workers deserve to work under humane conditions. They must be paid on time and according to agreement. They have a right to join trade unions and express political views. Their children should be at school. They should bury their loved ones in designated areas, inside or outside the farms. Constitutional rights of those waiting for settlement of land claims obtain and must be respected.

Turning the blogger's spoof into a positive clarion call; government, AgriSA, Cosatu, NAFU and other relevant stakeholders should work towards creating decent employment and working conditions for farm workers for the sector shall live long!

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