

Africa's Rainbow Nation troubled by racist time warp



Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters

A police officer stops a member of the Afrikaner Resistance Movement outside a court Tuesday from approaching supporters of the two men accused of hacking South African white supremacist leader Eugene Terre'blanche to death.

By Rohit Kachroo, NBC News

VENTERSDORP, South Africa -- At first, Ventersdorp seems like a town in a time warp. Not because of the striking, historic church which looms over the town, or the quaint drag of family-run stores, but because of a scene that looks far more sinister.

Outside the courthouse was a confrontation that might make some people feel that this patch of the Rainbow Nation has been sucked back into the darkness of its racist past.

On one side of the road, members of the far-right Afrikaner Resistance Movement, known by its Afrikaans initials AWB, are dressed in army uniforms and wave red-and-black flags with symbols that resemble the swastika.

A few yards from them, a group of about 100 black protesters are screaming slogans, singing anti-apartheid songs and holding home-made placards. One reads "AWB: Animals Without Brains."

A farmhand has been found guilty of the murder of South African white supremacist Eugene Terre'blanche. The court said Terreblanche was killed for money, not for his extreme politics. NBC's Rohit Kachroo reports.

Both groups are here because inside the court Chris Mahlangu, a 29-year old black man, is about to be convicted of the murder of South Africa's most high-profile white supremacist.

Eugene Terre'blanche was leader of the AWB during the apartheid years, a group of Afrikaner campaigners that mounted a futile attempt to resist the end of white minority rule.



Stephane De Sakutin/AFP - Getty Images

Chris Mahlangu, 29, seen arriving at court Tuesday, was found guilty Tuesday of murdering white supremacist Eugene Terre'blanche.

Known for his fiery speeches and for leading groups of supporters on horseback, some followers described the charismatic leader as “a cross between Moses and Mussolini.”

In 1997, he was jailed for the attempted murder of a black security guard and for assaulting a black gas-station worker.

In 2010, he was found dead. Mahlangu, who worked for Terre'blanche on his farm, was accused of bludgeoning him to death with a steel pipe as he slept.

Police said that the killing was the climax of dispute over unpaid wages, rather than a racially-motivated attack.

Mahlangu's lawyers said that he had been abused by Terre'blanche and acted in self-defense.

As the conviction was announced, a few skirmishes broke out close to the courthouse.

AWB members, angry that a second man had been cleared of murder, said that the case highlighted the violence faced by white farmers in South Africa. According to one estimate, 3,000 have been killed since Nelson Mandela's election in 1994.

They claimed that it showed that the Afrikaner people were a repressed minority which needed to be handed its own homeland.

"They are third-world people, we are first-world people" said AWB leader André Visagie.

"At the one side you have the blacks, at the other side you have the whites, and we will be separated in South Africa until this government recognizes the existence of the Boer people," he added.

Real victim in dock

The black protest group, which included some union representatives, said that the real victim was in the dock.

They said that Mahlangu had been treated despicably by his employer, claiming that it is a typically South African example of how many black people continue to lose out in the country's so-called "economic apartheid."

From this case, and the response to it, it is possible to draw a positive conclusion.

At the time of Terre'blanche's murder, there were fears that the killing of such a divisive figure might ignite racial violence across the country.

Two years on, the predicted race war has not materialized. South Africa has proved to be much stronger than that.

But it has, once again, highlighted how inequality and insecurity can continue to divide many people in modern South Africa along racial fault lines.

Of course, these two groups do not represent all of this country. But there is something in what unites them that is just as telling as what divides them -- frustration with modern South Africa.

Unlike many AWB members, the vast majority of South Africans believe in the potential of racial harmony.

But many people of all races are concerned that 18 years after its formation, the Rainbow Nation remains a work in progress.