

Ten reasons South African farm murders should be prioritised

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by Ernst Roets

AfriForum deputy CEO says the police minister refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem

The murderers of Ernest (77) and Annetjie (76) van Rooyen were each handed two life sentences last week. Oupa Mokoena (47) and Ezekiele Mguni (30) murdered the couple in January of this year on their farm Somerset near Parys in the Free State. Ernest's body was found on the floor of their farm store - he died of loss of blood. Annetjie was found in the freezer, where she had suffocated to death after being stuffed into it alive. In the same week the murderers were sentenced, Hennie Bentley (73) and Gerrit Myburgh (78) were murdered. Bentley died this weekend after his family was attacked on their farm outside Vanderbijlpark last week. Myburgh was murdered on his smallholding outside Heidelberg last Sunday evening.

Yes, the verdict and the sentence are good news. But whether this brought us closer to a solution for the brutal farm murder crisis in the country, is debatable. Yes, the sentences Mokoena and Mguni have to serve are a relief, and the detectives should be commended for enabling the court to come to its conclusion. But the completion of this individual incident brings us no closer to a solution for a growing crisis. Aftercare is important, but preventative care is even more important.

The only sustainable solution for farm murders is a pro-active strategy, which should be implemented by the Minister of Police. But to date the Minister is not only refusing to implement such a strategy, he also refuses to acknowledge that farm murders are a crisis. Motivation for prioritizing farm murders can be found in a myriad of reasons.

1. Acknowledgement is key

In spite of overwhelming evidence of a crisis, the Minister is refusing to acknowledge that there is a problem. A basic prerequisite for effective prevention of any extraordinary crime is that the facts should be acknowledged. As long as the Minister refuses to acknowledge farm murders as a crisis, a focussed counterstrategy will not be implemented. The first step is acknowledgement.

2. A unique crime requires a unique counterstrategy

Unique crimes requiring unique interventions is a basic premise in crime prevention theory. While Mthethwa is (for now) not acknowledging farm murders as unique crimes, they are. The most important argument here is that farmers live in remote areas where reaction times of the local police and even neighbours are insufficient.

3. Unusually frequent

The second edition of Land of Sorrow has just been published. The book details the murders of 1610 people on farms during the past two decades. Every incident mentioned in the book was verified by the publishers, but it means that the complete picture is not necessarily presented. Yes, the numbers are small when compared to the number of people murdered in black informal settlements. Yet, the numbers should be compared to the size of the group (in this case the total number of farmers in South Africa compared to the total number of people living in settlements). The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) recently tried to calculate the number of farm murders. Based on the latest available official numbers the farm murder rate is calculated at 98,8 per 100 000 per year. That is three times higher than the murder rate in South Africa and fourteen times higher than the average murder rate in the world.

4. Unique levels of brutality

The well-known sisters Roelien Schutte and Eileen de Jager of Crime Scene Clean-up have cleaned up more than two thousand crime scenes in South Africa, of which hundreds were farm attacks. In their book Blood Sisters they write that farm murders were some of the most gruesome. So gruesome, in fact, that they insist it should not be called murder but "farm torture" or "farm terror". Criminologist Lorraine

Claassen agreed in a report for the Solidarity Research Institute where she stated that the levels of violence in farm attacks can be compared to terror attacks.

5. Unique role in society

The unique role played by farmers in society should not be underestimated. The Minister often hides behind the accusation that those requesting the prioritization of farm murders regard farmers as "golden boys and girls". This is completely false. The truth is that farmers play a unique role in the community. Farmers are employers who support communities. Every murdered farmer means a murdered farm. Every murdered farm leaves a community reeling. Farmers ensure food security. If there are no farmers, there is no food. It's that simple.

6. Honouring a promise after the abolition of the commandoes

In 2003 former President Thabo Mbeki announced out of the blue that the commandoes would be abolished. He added that an alternative structure, managed by the police, would be instituted in its stead. Ten years later nothing has been done about it.

7. Deprioritizing in spite of a sharp rise

Interestingly enough, farm murders were regarded as priority crime in the past to a certain extent. Official statistics were released, conferences were held on the prevention of farm murders and the Government placed pressure on the police to end it. In 2007 we saw a sharp rise in farm murders (about 25%) after which the Minister intervened, but in a way no-one is able to explain. The Minister decided not to release further statistics on farm murders. This step effectively deprioritized farm murders.

8. Double the number of police murders

During 2011 the murder rate of police officers was calculated at 51 per 100 000. The Government's reaction was to call a national conference on police murders. The Minister sharply criticized the phenomenon and implemented a focussed counterstrategy. Four years previously the murder rate on farmers had already been twice as high. Yet, the crime was deprioritized. Keep in mind that policing is a high risk profession, while farming is certainly not supposed to be that.

9. Justification of specific crime categories

The favourite argument of the Minister is that farm murders cannot be prioritized because murder is an acknowledged crime; another form of it should not be prioritized. By this he means that farm murders are ordinary murders and that it makes no sense to elevate a type of murder above others. This may sound like a strong argument. Yet the counterargument (once again) is that unique problems should have unique solutions. The inconsistent actions of the Minister undermine the argument further. If this argument should be applied consistently, it means that theft of copper cables should not be prioritized. The same applies for rhino stock theft, violence against women and children and gang violence.

10. A political opportunity or a political embarrassment

Regardless of the Government's decision, it will carry a strong message. If these murders are prioritized, the ruling ANC will prove that it is not only concerned with its own voters (if we accept that most farmers are not ANC supporters) and that the party is indeed committed to make South Africa a better place to live. The continued denial, however, means that Government is portraying itself openly as an institution which fails to look after its citizens effectively, which has elevated political rhetoric to a level which exceeds the importance of lives.

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