TRAC

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ONLY ONE LEG OF MY TROUSERS ...

Mogopa school rising from the ruins after their return *Pic: Gill de Vlieg*

On June 18th 1991 the Minister of Regional and Land Affairs announced that the government will return the title of the farm Swartrand to the Bakwena ba Mogopa people. Swartrand is one of the two farms owned by the community which were expropriated by the government after their forced removal in February 1984. It was used for grazing and residential purposes. The adjacent farm, Hartebeeslaagte was used mainly for ploughing. The two farms were the basis of a communal lifestyle for a prosperous community of about 5000 people.

After being forcibly removed, the community moved twice more before returning without the authority's permission to their land in 1990. Since then they have been involved in a court case and lengthy negotiations to be allowed to stay on the land. Now the government has returned one of their farms. What do the people of Mogopa think of this concession?

"We are happy on one side and on the other side

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not. The government took my trousers, now it has brought back one leg. How can I walk with just one leg?" said Abram Mabidikame who was a prosperous farmer before the removal. Today he lives in a zinc shack on handouts from his children.

The missing 'leg' that Mabidikame refers to is the farm Hartebeeslaagte which remains in government hands and is being leased to white farmers for grazing. Hartebeeslaagte was Mogopa's breadbasket. It has good soil and was used by the community for growing their food, while Swartrand is rocky and mostly unsuitable for ploughing. TRAC spoke to Daphne Mongale:

"Nothing has changed. What we suffer from here is starvation ... until we are eating and living like before we do not appreciate this much. The only way to overcome the problem of starvation and hunger is to get Hartebeeslaagte. It was good ploughing land . That is why our forefathers bought it."

THE FORCED EXODUS

The persecution of the Mogopa community and their return has been well documented, but the salient points bear retelling. (For a full description of the forced removal and the subsequent wanderings of the community to various resettlement areas before their "illegal" return, see the TRAC publication ***Mogopa: And now we have no land***).

Before the removal Mogopa was a prosperous farming community. They had churches ,three schools and well constructed houses. They produced a surplus of food which they sold mainly through the marketing cooperatives of Ventersdorp and Koster. In 1981 they deposed their headman Jacob More for corruption. In 1983 the government approached More as the "headman" of the community and persuaded him to move to Pachsdraai a desolate area in the far Western Transvaal. Only ten families moved with him. The rest of the community refused to go. Shortly after bulldozers arrived and demolished the schools and churches, leaving only the people's houses. The community held a meeting and, confirming their refusal to move, rebuilt one of the schools over the next two months. Then after a previous "false alarm" the trucks came.

IN THE WILDERNESS

At 2am on the 14th February 1984 the entire community was forcibly removed to Pachsdraai and

Clearing the land at Mogopa

bulldozers demolished the whole village including the newly built school. At Pachsdraai, access to the community was denied initially. They were given zinc shacks to live in. But they didn't stay at Pachsdraai. Sympathizers organised trucks to take them to Bethanie in Bophutatswana where they had negotiated with a chief, also of the Bakwena, the right to settle. This promised land of milk and honey turned out to be a nightmare. The people were not allowed to meet, they could not receive their pensions without changing their citizenship, the water supply was poor and there was no land for farming. The Bop government gave them no development assistance. Meanwhile lawyers for the community had instituted court proceedings claiming that the removal itself had been conducted illegally. Finally in 1985 they won the case after it had been taken on appeal. It was an empty victory. A few days before the court decision the government expropriated the farms, making it legally impossible for them to return despite the court decision.

During 1986 and early 1987 they remained at Bethanie becoming increasingly impoverished. In 1987 a church initiative, the Botshabello trust, negotiated to buy the farm Holgat for them near their land.

Pic: Gill de Vlieg

Preparations were made to move to Holgat and excitement mounted. But the government was determined to thwart them. A week before their planned return in July 1987, it expropriated Holgat supposedly for an agricultural college which was never built. After that the people refused to stay at Bethanie. So the government agreed to make land available for them as a "temporary" measure at Ondersterpoort near Sun City, after once again refusing their request to be given their land back.

THE RETURN

In September 1988 the then Minister of Development Aid , Gerrit Viljoen gave the community permission to visit their graves on Swartrand. Eighty people, mainly pensioners, were chosen to go. The government had erected zinc single sex accommodation for them at the grave site. They refused to occupy these shacks since, according to tradition, dwellings can not be constructed at a graveyard. Instead they erected their own shacks on the foundations of their demolished homes.

When the period of their permission was up, the police came and told them to leave within seven days. Joseph Kgatitswe managed to leave the farm by a back way and contacted their lawyer, who obtained an interdict restraining the police from evicting them. After the Supreme court had refused to uphold the interdict, the case was taken on appeal. In the meantime the community was obliged to make an undertaking that no more people would come onto the farm.

But nothing could stop the homesick community. Over the next 18 months people trickled back. They came from Bethanie and Ondersterpoort, and from the towns where they had settled. By the time the appeal was heard in August 1991, about 2000 people had returned. The government called them trespassers, but the judge refused to order their eviction. Instead he ordered the parties to "negotiate". During the negotiations the government conceded the right of some of the people to stay, but has never conceded that all the land belongs to the people who have returned. So now it is returning only half of the Mogopa people 's land to them, the least productive half, the farm Swartrand. The productive farm of Hartebeeslaagte is still being leased to white farmers for grazing.

WHY ONLY ONE LEG?

So why did the government give back only Swartrand, one of the two farms owned by the Mogopa people? About 2000 of the community of 5000 who were removed have returned. The rest have mainly settled in the larger towns where they can find work. A few, mainly those who "sold out" the community by agreeing to the removal, have stayed at Pachsdraai, Bethanie or Ondersterpoort. The government is claiming that as only about half of the people have returned, the community can only get half of its land back. This is spurious logic. All the land was owned by the community. Their title deeds were stolen from them by the government after the forced removal.

The land was owned in communal tenure - or in the collective name of the Bakwena ba Mogopa. It was a sophisticated system which people developed in order to survive economically. It integrated farming and migrant labour. It had internal rules and regulations which governed access to land, in-migration and social relations. While only part of the original community has returned, the social system requires

all the same parts if it is to be viable again. Members of the community who have not returned still have a claim to a place there provided they follow the rules laid down in the Mogopa constitution drawn up democratically by the community.

The government does not favour communal tenure and wants black communities to engage in individual commercial farming or abandon agricultural land altogether. Their refusal to recognise the community's right to the second farm, Hartebeeslaagte, represents their lack of respect for people's proven social survival systems. The government seems intent on impoverishing the community by withholding their means of survival. One may well ask whether the government would confiscate half of a white farmer's land if he were to die and leave his widow behind!

It would seem that the real reason for the government's reluctance to fully redress the wrong done to Mogopa is to appease right wing sentiment in the Ventersdorp district of the Western Transvaal. Therefore so little has changed under De Klerk and there is still no real commitment by the government to redress the wrongs done by forced removal policies of the past.

THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Since their return, the community has not sat back. They now have a strong committee which includes women and the youth. They have rebuilt their school twice more (The first time it was blown down by strong winds). With the assistance of the town planning department of the University of the Witwatersrand, a proper plan for the township on Swartrand has been drawn up. And the parents have more hope that their is a future for their children - Daphne Mongale:

"The children are starting to see their future here. Why must they leave to look for jobs outside? There is now a school again. But we must sit down and plan properly how to rebuild what has been destroyed."

And the government's role? Joseph Kgatitswe - chairman of the Mogopa Community Association:

""They must not come here and tell us how to farm. We are scarred from what they did to us. How can you trust someone who has wounded you when they say they want to help? What the government must do now is give us money to rebuild and start farming again. They must give us money for proper houses. They must fix the roads. They must build two more schools like we had before. They must sink more boreholes, and they must provide electricity and telephones, things we would have now if we had not been removed."

Reconstructing homes and lives. *Pic: Gill de Vlieg*

And the role of well wishers and non government bodies? Joseph Kgatitswe:

"If they want to help us they can get us seed and fertiliser and implements. And the churches can come in and rebuild their buildings."

Meanwhile the Mogopa farming committee is working out how to allocate the inadequate ploughing land at Swartrand so that some farming can begin this year. P.G. Marais, the Deputy Minister of Development Aid in 1991 promised that the government will never sell Hartebeeslaagte or give it away. And the people of Mogopa are instructing their lawyers to apply to The Advisory Commission on Land Allocation to have Hartebeeslaagte returned to them.

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