



TRAC

Transvaal Rural Action Committee

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BLOEDFONTEIN AND GEWEERFONTEIN: REMOVALS SUSPENDED, PROPOSED INCORPORATION GOES ON

Introduction

On the 16 September 1986, on the very last day of that parliamentary session, the Borders of Particular States Extension Amendment Bill was passed by the tri-cameral parliament. The Bill makes provision for the incorporation by State President's promulgation of various specified areas into the 'independent homelands' — Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei.

The potential implications for the communities affected are devastating. For many communities incorporation could result in the loss of their South African citizenship. For example the 10 000 Tswana-speaking people in Braklaagte are presently living in an area administered by the central government and are entitled to South African citizenship. They have the right to live and work where they desire. However, if they are incorporated into Bophuthatswana they will lose their right to South African citizenship and the rights that go with it. They will no longer be able to work and reside where they please.

The community of two adjoining farms, Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein, have been earmarked for incorporation into Bophuthatswana. Very few residents will lose their South African citizenship as approximately 95% are either North Sotho or Ndebele. However, it is probable that because the community is predominantly non-Tswana it will face severe pressures from the harsh Bophuthatswana administration if incorporated. For example non-Tswanas in Bophuthatswana find it extremely difficult to obtain basic rights like pensions and trading licences. Previous experience of the Bophuthatswana administration has made the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein community well aware of this and they have made strong representations to the government to reverse its decision to incorporate the area into Bophuthatswana.

Right through the last quarter of 1985 and most of 1986 the government also indicated that the community is to be resettled in the Rust de Winter area. Recently it has declared in telexes to the Star and Business Day that this is not the case, and that only people who request it, will be resettled.

A sketch of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein

Bloedfontein, covering 6 113 morgen, was finally paid for in 1929 and Geweerfontein, covering 832 morgen in 1948. The farms are viewed as a single unit by the residents and have the same headman. They have a population of approximately 15 000. It is one of the few areas in South Africa where a

black peasantry has been able to survive, to an extent, the onslaught of the Apartheid system and capitalist agriculture.

Presently the area is administered by KwaNdebele. Most of the present residents were born on the farms concerned. Through the years the community has built up a substantial infrastructure. There are roads, dams, boreholes, 3 primary schools, a high school, a clinic, a post office and various other substantial buildings. The clinic and 2 of the schools were built entirely from funds donated by the community.

A large proportion of the residents produce enough food to subsist adequately. When there are good rains some produce a surplus. Little is sold on the market, however: this is partially due to the cohesiveness of the population. A local resident expressed this in the following way:

What we grow goes into our stomachs. We don't sell food. If we have grain, we give some to our neighbours. Then the next time, they will give us what they have. Some of the people have got tractors. We give some of what we reap to them to use their tractor, or we pay money.

The nursing sister in charge of the local clinic said

I have never seen a case of malnutrition. And we don't have many bad sicknesses here, not even whooping cough and measles. The children are immunised.

At present there are up to 2 000 peasants on the 2 farms, the average farm size is 4 morgen. The main crops are maize and sorghum. All the fields are ploughed by tractors. Cattle, goats and pigs are reared.

However, behind this picture of apparent security is much insecurity and simmering hostility between the North Sotho/Ndebele residents and the Bagatla ba Mocha, a Tswana grouping. This hostility has existed from the 1920's and has allegedly been fuelled by racist government policies and corrupt chiefs both past and present. It has always remained a war of words. However the potential for this hostility to lead to violent conflict is now very high.

At present it appears that the government is using ethnicity and the distortion of the community's history to justify the incorporation and the possible removal of the 2 farms concerned.

The purchase of Bloedfontein

The way in which Bloedfontein was purchased has had significant implications for the present residents. The story of the purchase of the farm Bloedfontein has been told by many of the old residents. The facts are always the same. Perhaps the most reliable account is the one told by Mr Sam Kekana, the son of the main purchaser. Mr Kekana was about 19 when the purchase was first initiated in 1922 or 1923. He left the area with his father in 1927. He tells the following story:

I, Sam Madimetja Kekana, was born at Tweefontein in 1903. I was, however, brought up at Bloedfontein (Senotlelo). The owner of Bloedfontein then was a Mister Jan Schuurman ...

My late father, Mr Martin Kekana, was a foreman at Bloedfontein.

During 1922 or 1923, Mr Schuurman decided to sell this farm, Bloedfontein, to my father and his group of men. At that time there were about 40 families on the farm. They were all North Sotho or KwaNdebele.

My father called a meeting in 1922 or 1923 in December. At that meeting it was agreed that we would purchase Bloedfontein.

We sold a large number of cattle to make the payments.

Mr Schuurman emphatically told my father that he must never ever leave Bloedfontein for another area ...

He asked my father whether he had any chief or not. The authority of a chief was sought when one had to buy a farm or a plot. My father said his chief was out at Zebediela in the Northern Transvaal to which Mr Schuurman answered that Zebediela was out of reach and he would prefer a chief that was nearby. A neighbouring Tswana chief, Chief Robert Moepi, of the Bakgatla Ba Mocha tribe was chosen by both my father and Mr Schuurman to be the chief to sign.

It must be pointed out that Chief Moepi and his people never paid a penny towards the purchase of Bloedfontein. Chief Moepi wanted to crook my father and take his land simply because he had signed when my father bought Bloedfontein.

In 1925 Chief Moepi was sentenced to 3 months in gaol after it was found that he had taken money that the community had given him for the purchase of Bloedfontein and spent it on a car ...

Eventually in 1927 my father got fed-up with Moepi's dealings and decided to leave the area.

Most of the original purchasers decided to stay on and contend with the treachery of Chief Moepi. In 1929 the £9 169 and 5 shillings owed for the 6 113 morgen farm was eventually paid off. The title deed stated that the land was held in trust for the Bakgatla Ba Mocha people under the leadership of Chief Robert Moepi. This was to have serious implications for the community.

The purchase of Geweerfontein

In 1948 the residents of Bloedfontein purchased the farm Geweerfontein, measuring 832 morgen for £1 872 and 18 shillings.

A Bloedfontein resident who was one of the original purchasers tells how Geweerfontein was bought:

The farm was bought from a copper mining company, the Bourke Trust and Estate Company. Chief Patrick Moepi, the son of Robert, first approached the Bakgatla Ba Mocha and asked them if they wanted to buy the farm. They were not interested as they felt the farm was not fertile.

Moepi then approached the headman of the Bloedfontein people, Amos Moeletsi. Moeletsi called a meeting of the community to discuss the possible purchase. The Bloedfontein people agreed that it would be worthwhile. A bag of kaffircorn, which is £3 and 8 shillings, was collected from each family to pay for the farm.

Unfortunately the residents allowed Moepi's son, Robert, to sign the title deed.

The results of the Moepis signing the title deeds

The Moepis signing of the respective title deeds has had unfortunate results for the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein community and has unfortunately led to the residents despising the Bakgatla Ba Mocha.

Through the years the main allegation was that the Bakgatla Ba Mocha refused to acknowledge that they did not own the land and used their claim to the land to their own advantage. The residents feel intensely insulted by the Bakgatla ba Mocha's claim to the land.

A memorandum written in 1977 and addressed to the Bakgatla Ba Mocha expresses this:

The Bakgatla Ba Mocha chief Moepi signed as nominee on behalf of our fathers when the farm Bloedfontein 515 was purchased and he is not and will never be the owner of the said farm nor can the Bakgatla Ba Mocha tribal Authority become owners of the said land, the lawful owners are the heirs to the estates of our fathers.

The memorandum goes on to say

The said Bakgatla Ba Mocha have appointed headman who have wrongfully, unlawfully and fraudulently put people on the farm Bloedfontein and the said Headman have collected money from the new arrivals and placed them on our property.

The money so collected from these people for a lengthy period is enough to buy five farms the size of Bloedfontein but the said Headman and the Bakgatla Ba Mocha have not accounted to the Bloedfontein Community as owners of the land nor has it accounted to the authorities.



Residents at one of the several water-pumps.

The failure of the Bakgatla Ba Mocha to provide schools and the alleged stealing of school subsidies sent by the government is also a major factor contributing towards the hostility most Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents have for the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. The same memorandum says that

The Bloedfontein (Senotlelo) Community builds schools without the assistance of the Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority and/or Tribes assistance but once the said schools have been built and a subsidy is paid towards those schools the said Bakgatla Ba Mocha take the subsidy and use it for their own purposes, and they state money must be kept by the Chieftainess.

When there are debts arising from building schools we are not given the money required but we are told there is no money.

When we, the community of Bloedfontein, contributed towards the debts of buildings of schools we have built and we pay in at the tribal offices then such money is allocated towards other matters or other schools and not for the projects earmarked for such contributions when in fact the money is expressly contributed by us for our schools.

The residents demanded

that all the money contributed towards our school building fund to be returned to pay for outstanding debts on our schools.

We want to be restored to our former position where we had our own trust account and allocations which was taken by the Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority.

Another major issue was that the Bakgatla Ba Mocha collected rents from the various shops in the area. In a letter to the Commissioner for the area the community complained

That the said Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority has taken certain funds which legally belong to our community and are still collecting rentals for shops.

The community demanded that these rents be paid to the community.

The above complaints have been issues since the 1920's and have contributed to the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein community having an intense dislike for the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. In the 1980's the community became more determined to stand up to the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. At present the latter are not allowed to come onto Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein and no monies are given over to them. The community, unlike the government, is determined that the Bakgatla Ba Mocha will never again rule them.

From 1972 the government used the Moepis' signing of the title deeds to justify Bophuthatswana administering the area. In 1979 the administration of the area was taken over by KwaNdebele. This handover was greeted with a great deal of jubilation by the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents who felt that their oppression at the hands of the Bakgatla ba Mocha was at last to end.

However, they had not realised that homeland administrations are reasonably uniform. A letter to the TRAC illustrates this and the intense disappointment felt.

On the 8 August 1979 we were told that we are under the KwaNdebele government. This made us very happy and we thought we will be relieved from slavery.

What surprises us is that they do not allow us to do anything on our farms, such as the building of schools, shops, churches, etc. They always tell us to wait without giving reasons.

A remarkable situation developed when in 1983 the KwaNdebele administration told the headman from Bloedfontein that the Bloedfontein people 'were no longer known in the KwaNdebele Government'. This appeared to be a result of official confusion about the final terms of the Transvaal consolidation plans. KwaNdebele clearly did not want the responsibility for the area should the final plans result in the transfer of the area to Bophuthatswana. It was finally decided that KwaNdebele would continue to administer the territory until there was clarity.

The present attempts by the government to incorporate the area into Bophuthatswana and remove the residents

It appears that President Lucas Mangope was temporarily prepared to give up the area as he was not keen to have non-Tswanas in his domain. However, Mangope and chieftainess Moepi, the wife of the late Patrick Moepi, a Mangope loyalist and presently a member of the Bophuthatswana legislative assembly, were seemingly intent on one day regaining the land with one important proviso — that the troublesome Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents be removed.

This was conveyed to government and in the consolidation plans released in September 1985 it was revealed that Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein were once again to become part of Bophuthatswana but the residents were to be moved to the Rust de Winter area. KwaNdebele was to receive Rust de Winter as 'compensation' for the loss of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein.

An article in the Star on the 25 September 1985 was the first indication the community received that the government intended to remove the residents and incorporate the area into Bophuthatswana. The government had conducted all its negotiations with the Bophuthatswana and KwaNdebele administrations and totally ignored the Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein residents. Subsequent correspondence shows that the government used the signing of the title deeds by the Moepis as a pretext to totally ignore the representatives of the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein community.

Distortion did not stop at the unquestioned acceptance of Moepi's claim to the land. The Star article indicated very directly the extent to which the government was prepared to misinform the public so as to pursue its own plans with as little opposition as possible. In the article referred to, Mr Chris Heunis, referring to the residents of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein, said that 'these people had already agreed to cooperate and voluntarily collaborate with this resettlement.' This misrepresentation by the government was rapidly followed by another. In an article in the Business Day (26

September, 1985) Mr Ben Wilkens, the Deputy Minister of Land Affairs and Development, was quoted as saying that the removal would involve moving only 'a few dozen families'.

Almost immediately the community wrote to Mr Wilkens. Their letter dated 1 October 1985 told him that they were not prepared to move and asked him 'with whom did you negotiate and when?'

The community accused the government of trying to rewrite their history:

... you say that these 2 farms belong to the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. This proves beyond doubt that you know nothing concerning these farms.

The letter then proceeds to explain to Mr Wilkens how the farms were bought.

Wilkens responded in a letter dated 18 December 1985 by repeating that the area was to be incorporated into Bophuthatswana and the residents moved:

... I have to advise that the fate of the farms Geweerfontein and Bloedfontein has been determined by an agreement between the South African and KwaNdebele Governments.

The decision that the farms Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein be included in Bophuthatswana can unfortunately not be reconsidered. It is however trusted that you will find it ultimately possible to accept the decision as well as the compensatory land to be made available in the Rust de Winter area.

This curt response was totally rejected by the Bloedfontein community. They wrote back to the Minister on the 21 January 1986 repeating that they were totally opposed to the move and to incorporation into Bophuthatswana. They again asked to be consulted.

The tribe is not prepared to move to Rust de Winter area because they love their farms and they are happy. It is painful to be told about the removal from the farm you bought without being consulted. This means forced removal and we are not prepared to accept this to happen.

The Minister did not have the courtesy to respond to this letter. After numerous telexes sent by the community's lawyer the Minister finally sent a reply dated the 25 June 1986 reaffirming the government's decision to incorporate Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein into Bophuthatswana and remove the residents to Rust de Winter.

The decision to transfer the farms Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein was taken after the Governments of KwaNdebele and Bophuthatswana have (sic) been consulted and after their consent had been obtained. The RSA Government is therefore not prepared to reconsider the decision and discussions with the people concerned regarding alternative land in KwaNdebele would be arranged once the land has been identified.

A letter repeating the community's objection to the move and the incorporation and requesting a meeting with the Minister concerned was sent. In early December 1986 the community



The elders of the community discussing the removal and incorporation

received a letter from Wilkens repeating the government's refusal to drop the planned incorporation of the area concerned into Bophuthatswana. There was no mention of the proposed removal to Rust de Winter.

The announcement by the government that they are to remove the Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein people provoked a storm of publicity. The government then retracted the removal threat. In a telex (18 September 1986) to the Star and Business Day Mr Ben Wilkens stated that reports that people are to be moved 'are devoid of all truth'.

He confirmed that the incorporation was to go ahead and used Moepi's claim to the land to justify it.

The two farms belong to the Bagatla tribe of Chieftainess Regina Moepi who made strong representations for the incorporation of Geweerfontein and Bloedfontein into Bophuthatswana. After consultations between the South African government and the governments of Bophuthatswana and KwaNdebele it was decided to accede to the request of the chieftainess.

The government now appears to be undecided about removing the community. For the moment it appears to have taken heed of the community's statement that they would rather die than move.

However, the government is determined to press ahead with incorporating the area into Bophuthatswana. Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein residents are very anxious about the future. They do not want to have anything to do with the

Bakgatla Ba Mocha or the Bophuthatswana authorities. Although the KwaNdebele administration has not done much for them, they have left them alone. The community fears that after the incorporation chieftainess Moepi might try and make life impossible and pressurize them to move. A big fear is that with the help of Mangope's police she might try to settle her own subjects on the land and try to strip the headman, Mr Ben Tema, of his power.

These anxieties and the potential for conflict are illustrated in the following letter from the Bloedfontein Community Authority to the TRAC.

... we, the Bloedfonteiners, do not want to be under the Tswanas. We entirely do not favour the Tswana Government, this will cause bloodshed.

It is apparent that the experience of the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents has contributed towards them having a strong sense of ethnicity. However, as the letters to Wilkens indicate the community is also aware of the major role the government is playing in fanning the ethnic hostility. The community has seen how the government is attempting to renew their subjugation by the Bakgatla Ba Mocha.

The response of the farmers in the Rust de Winter area

It appears that a factor that led the government to rethink the moving of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein residents is the reluctance of many white farmers in the Rust de Winter area to sell their land to the government. Many settled in the

area in the 1930's and are very resistant to selling up.

In a letter to Frontline magazine a white farmer in the area graphically described the government's treatment of the residents and how the latter feel about it:

Overnight all has changed. At 3 pm on Friday, September 13, the President of the Farmer's Union received a Pretoria phone call. This announced that the next day, Saturday, the KwaNdebele Cabinet would be told that Rust de Winter was to be included in its borders.

A deputation hastily phoned the relevant Minister and his Deputy. An appointment was made for making a personal plea. Community meetings have been held. Consternation is everywhere — dismay — disbelief that this can be done to us arbitrarily.

The area which is Rust der Winter consisted originally of 6 farms. But it is not a case of 6 families having to move. We are an irrigation scheme and support a community of 65 small farms and 300 inhabitants. The cost to the taxpayer of paying us all out is immense. The cost to the community is incalculable.

She concluded by saying that the move

is against the people's desire ... We plead for a reprieve.

It is clear that none of the people who the government wants to move are willing partners.

The Future

In pushing through the Borders of Particular States Extension Amendment Bill the government has once more revealed the hollowness of its reform programme. The coloured and Indian houses have again indicated that their pledge to fight apartheid from within is totally misleading.

The government now appears to be undecided about removing the community, however it appears determined to press ahead with incorporating the area into Bophuthatswana. How the community will respond to the incorporation of the area into Bophuthatswana is a question that nobody can answer. There is, however, a great deal of anxiety about the future. Residents feel that chieftainess Moepi might try and make life impossible for the residents. Nevertheless they are certain that however great the pressure they will not be forced off their land.