

OPINION



Clan tragedy rooted in the past

Chegos would be alive if land claim had been seen to, writes Mathatha Tsedu

BLACK EYE

When the consolidation of the dispossession of Africans was at its height following the 1936 Land Act, mass removals of black people from their lands was the order of the day.

Vast communities and families woke up to find that they had been fenced in and had become part of the property of some white farmer who had either bought the land from people who never owned it in the first place, or had been given the land as compensation for fighting in a war the dispossessed knew nothing about.

Our history is littered with such people. Some stayed and became slaves of the farmers, where they toiled for virtually nothing in return for the privilege, status, privilege, of staying on what had been their land all along.

Others left, to seek areas where they could live as people. The Chego family now scattered around the Tubatse area of the Northern Province and

Mpumalanga, is one such family.

They trekked, but never forgot where they came from. They had left the graves of their forebears behind, and in that inexplicable human feeling, they kept returning to tend to the graves.

They also nursed the hope that someday the iniquitous system of slavery known as apartheid would fall, and they would return to live where their hearts really were.

This hope, this need to reconnect and honour those who brought them into this world, to appease them if you will, resulted in a new ritual of twice yearly treks to the land that once was their own.

Last week, their annual pilgrimage, which takes the form of offerings and a feast, went awry when the ramshackle truck they were using overturned and killed 48 Chego clan members.

The feast that was not to be has turned into a mass funeral, and a clan tragedy of a proportion that is difficult to comprehend.

And with this tragedy, many questions arise about our lives and needs as

black people in our now free country.

When the new government took over and cited land restitution as a priority to ensure that those such as the Chego clan could reclaim what was theirs, members of the clan did their bit.

They filed their claim, and since 1998 have been waiting to hear of progress. An overburdened Land Claims Commission (LCC) labours under a huge load of applications, resulting in long delays.

It now transpires that farmer Francois du Toit, who is the "legal owner" of the land that really belongs to the clan, had not even been informed that a claim had been lodged.

Two nights after the tragedy, Mpumalanga LCC officials were trying to locate him in night drives, to tell him not only that a claim exists, but to also beg, yes, beg him to allow a burial of nearly fifty people.

He has turned down the request, and in doing so, the bond between the 48 deceased and their land has been broken

by the dictates of dispossession and business needs.

The family rightly feels that the dragging of feet by the LCC contributed to the tragedy, as the trip would have been unnecessary if their claim had been finalised. LCC official Tozi Gwanya disputes this, blaming the cumbersome process of validating claims.

Yes there are such processes, but if the needs of our people had been prioritised like the arms deal was, sufficient resources would have been deployed to ensure a speedy processing of land claims.

As matters stand, many communities who want their land back will still be waiting ten years from now, as Gwanya and his overworked staff go through their laborious tasks.

It is this attitude by the government when it comes to black people that sees us begging for the right to "bury our people on "Du Toit's farm". It is this pussyfooting around issues of reparations, whether they be for land, or for victims of apartheid's police excesses, that sees our people having to struggle to

get what the advent of freedom is supposed to deliver as a matter of course.

It is this apologetic attitude from institutions of authority that sees black players in cricket having to be begged into the teams where they are made to feel unwelcome and undeserving, just as the Chego family has been treated.

There is a need for someone like Minister of Land Affairs Thoko Didiza to look at whether the resources given to the LCC are adequate and how claims can be dealt with more speedily.

If that was to happen, the tragic death of the Chego clan members would not have been in vain. Failure to do that will mean we may witness more such tragedies as people cross the country looking for their ancestors. And that surely must be avoided.

■ *Mathatha Tsedu is the chairperson of the SA National Editors' Forum and also Deputy Chief Executive: News at the SABC. He writes in his personal capacity.*