



## How Government Farms Are Plundered

Wednesday, 25th of April 2007

By Mbatjiua Ngavirue

WINDHOEK

Thieves have looted the government farm Tredgold, stripping clean most of its valuable infrastructure such as water tanks, virtually all the farm gates, zinc sheeting on parts of the garage and storage areas, as well as built-in cupboards in the house.

The Government purchased the farm in February 2006 with the intention of resettling small-scale farmers under its Land Resettlement Programme.

There is, furthermore, evidence that this is not the only government farm looted recently.

The farm was under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement office at Gobabis when thieves plundered valuable assets from the farm.

Many resettled farmers are already complaining about a lack of infrastructure on the farming units they are given.

Thieves stripping their farms bare, before they even arrive, only makes their task so much more difficult.

In the ten months March to December 2006, Erastus Nghishoono, head of the Omaheke Lands office, allegedly appointed three unofficial, hand-picked caretakers to look after the farm Tredgold. The first was Simon Atobita, and then Nghishoono's own nephew and driver Matheus, and last Josif Hamutenya (or Amutenya).

Hamutenya is still nominally the caretaker but, when New Era visited the farm last Friday, he was AWOL, saying he was in Windhoek when reached on his mobile phone.

There was perhaps no real incentive for him to stay anyway, with the farm already ransacked.

Legal representatives of the first caretaker, Simon Atobita, have issued summons against Nghishoono, alleging fraud.

Atobita says he resigned from his job in Gobabis after Nghishoono promised him that the Government would give him part of the farm if he helped look after it.

"If officials from the ministry come for an inspection, just say you worked for the previous owner for six years and they will consider you for resettlement.

"Don't worry, they won't chase you away. They might remove you from the homestead, but they will give you another part of the farm," Nghishoono allegedly told him.

According to Atobita, Nghishoono also allegedly told him the Government would supply him with food and anything else he might need.

During the eight months he stayed there with his girlfriend, he alleges Nghishoono did not once bring him food. He says he lived on savings from his previous job throughout this period.

Last Saturday morning, Nghishoono gave his own version of what transpired. He says he simply suggested to Atobita that if he looked after the farm on a voluntary basis, the likelihood was that the Government would consider his application for resettlement favourably.

In October 2006, Atobita went to Gobabis to attend to some important personal business.

When he got there, Nghishoono asked him for the keys to the main farm gate and farmhouse, saying he wanted to go and inspect the farm.

However, when Atobita wanted to return to Tredgold, Nghishoono was reluctant to give him the keys.

After repeatedly trying to get the keys, Nghishoono informed him on the third day that he had found a new caretaker and that Atobita's services were therefore no longer needed.

Naturally upset by this, Atobita asked Nghishoono how he could have taken on someone else after he had suffered for eight months on the farm without any compensation.

Nghishoono allegedly explained that the matter was out of his hands, because the ministry in Windhoek appointed the new caretaker.

The new caretaker, however, subsequently turned out to be Nghishoono's by-now-infamous nephew and driver, Matheus.

Atobita nevertheless demanded that Nghishoono pay him for eight months' work on Tredgold or resettle him on another farm, but Nghishoono just remained silent.

He reported the matter to the Labour Commissioner's office in Gobabis, where they advised him that the matter was so serious he should seek legal representation.

Atobita swears that when he left Tredgold, the infrastructure on the farm was still intact with nothing missing.

The foreman of the owner of the other section of Tredgold, Francois Nolte, who was reluctant to give his name, confirmed that the infrastructure was still there when Atobita left the farm.

Both Matheus and Josif Hamutenya, however, also claim that everything was still there when they left. Matheus further claimed that he only acted as caretaker for a very short period – two weeks or so.

Why the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement has to rely on unreliable, unofficial caretakers is by no means clear.

The previous owner of the section of Tredgold purchased by the Government, Christie Labuschagne, says he was more than willing to look after the farm until new occupants moved in.

"I told them I would be prepared to stay and help the new occupants. I especially wanted to explain the pipeline network to them, and show them what to do if one water-point ran out of water.

"To me it's a very sad story. I had fully developed the farm, and the people brought there would be ready to just start farming," he said with disappointment.

Labuschagne sold his portion of Tredgold to the Government in February 2006, when it also

purchased three other farms – Anaeib (or Anabeib), Ums and another farm whose name is unknown.

The information he has is that thieves looted all the farms and that the farm gates are gone from all four farms.

The problem of thieves stealing infrastructure from government farms is not a new one and dates back at least to the early 90s.

Most people have always thought private individuals – mainly from the communal areas – carried out the thefts.

This weekend, New Era discovered stolen zinc sheeting and other materials at Schellenberg where Nghishoono has been resettled. On his part, Nghishoono conceded that the materials were stolen but denied that he was responsible.

Meanwhile, the person who allegedly brought the stolen materials to Nghishoono's farm, an employee of the Ministry of Works, Kaitjomibiri Katjirua, claimed he brought the materials there with the intention to ask Nghishoono if he could have them.

Speaking to people in Omaheke, the feeling seems to be that no ministry can be so monumentally incompetent that it leaves million-dollar properties unsecured – not even the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement.

The inescapable conclusion that knowledgeable people in the region feel, is that leaving farms unguarded is a deliberate policy aimed at facilitating theft by government officials, working in collusion with government contractors.

The thieves stole two large water tanks at Tredgold. One of these was mounted on a 10-metre-high steel stand. To remove this huge tank quickly, without attracting too much attention, would have required a truck fitted with a crane – something not available to your everyday, common thief.

Atobita says that one night such a truck once woke him and his girlfriend up in the middle of the night. Out of fear, his girlfriend started screaming and the truck quickly drove away.

He further alleges that whenever he left the farm for short periods, he would hear when he returned that Nghishoono had been there on hunting expeditions with soldiers to shoot springbok. Mercifully for the springbok at least, the soldiers only used normal hunting rifles and not AK-47s, as they are sometimes known to do.

He allegedly also gave former owner, Labuschagne, permission to shoot eight springbok on the farm.