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Govt foray triggers fear among farmers

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THE Ministry of Lands and Resettlement sent teams to more than 40 commercial farms this week to assess if they can be utilised for the Ministry's land-use plans.

The move has sent shock waves through the farming community, as their owners fear it is a prelude to expropriation.

The Namibian has reliably learnt that 45 farms are targeted and their owners - among them 10 black commercial farmers - received the same standard letters from the Lands Ministry.

In a letter dated October 18 2006, Lands and Resettlement Minister Jerry Ekandjo informed the farmers that the assessment was required to "create a land-use model".

In the same letter, which one affected farmer showed to this newspaper, Ekandjo further stated that "the data collected is important for the Government's resettlement programme and (its) regional integrated land-use plans".

A Namibian farmer, who only bought his farm 10 years ago and has invested huge sums in it, said he feared his farm would be expropriated.

"In the letter the Minister used the word 'resettlement', so I don't think I can keep the farm," he said.

"The team came to my farm on Wednesday and they were accompanied by a Police officer and a labour inspector.

Why do you need Police and somebody of the Labour Ministry if you want to make an agricultural assessment only?" he told The Namibian.

"They looked at all boreholes and noted down their positions with a GPS device and they even took down the serial numbers of the windmills, is that necessary for a land-use plan?" Most of the targeted farms are situated in the areas Block D and J, demarcations used on the official farm map.

"Our assessment teams normally go to farms we intend to buy," Crispin Matongela, spokesperson in the Lands Ministry, told The Namibian yesterday.

However, he could not say if this was the case in this situation.

He would neither confirm nor deny whether some or all of the 45 farms had been listed for expropriation.

"The teams are still out there, we must wait for them to return to office and give a report on the assessments regarding productivity and suitability for livestock farming or crop production," Matongela added.

The Chief Executive Officer of the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) would not comment on the possible expropriation.

Sakkie Coetzee said several members of his organisation had notified his office that they had received such letters, but he could not state the exact number.

"We encourage farmers to co-operate with the assessment teams, since they do their work according to the stipulations of the Commercial Land Reform Act," Coetzee told The Namibian yesterday.

The land reform process will cost the Namibian Government N\$3,7 billion over the next 15 years for acquiring a targeted 10,3 million hectares of commercial farmland to resettle 6 727 families by 2020, according to the Land Reform Report and Strategic Action Plan which was made public in August this year.

It was compiled by a team of experts at the end of 2004.

It recommended the acquisition of 270 000 hectares of commercial farmland annually until 2020.

This translates into about 50 commercial farms per year, averaging 5 000 hectares each.

Government has bought 194 commercial farms on the basis of the willing-buyer, willing-seller principle since the start of the land reform process 10 years ago.

These farms cover a total of 1,2 million hectares and 1 616 families were resettled on them.

Commercial farmers wanting to sell their farms on the open market must first offer them to the Ministry of Lands.

After an assessment the Ministry will either buy it at market price or issue a waiver certificate to the owner, who can then sell it.

Government has expropriated three commercial farms up to now - Ongombo West, Okorusu and Marburg.

Namibia has about 69 million hectares of land that can be used for agriculture.

About half of that (36 million ha) is freehold land, owned by some 3 000 commercial farmers.

Approximately 33 million ha is communal or non-freehold land.