

‘Bury them alive!’: White South Africans fear for their future as horrific farm attacks escalate

Frank Chung

10-12 minutes

LAST month, British woman Sue Howarth and her husband Robert Lynn were woken at 2am by three men breaking into a window of their remote farm in Dullstroom, a small town in the northeast of South Africa, about 240km from the nearest capital city.

The couple, who had lived in the area for 20 years, were tied up, stabbed, and [tortured with a blowtorch for several hours](#). The masked men stuffed a plastic bag down Mrs Howarth’s throat, and attempted to strangle her husband with a bag around his neck.

The couple were bundled into their own truck, still in their pyjamas, and driven to a roadside where they were shot. Mrs Howarth, 64, a former pharmaceutical company executive, was shot twice in the head. Mr Lynn, 66, was shot in the neck.

Miraculously he survived, and managed to flag down a passer-by early on Sunday morning. Mrs Howarth, who police said was “unrecognisable” from her injuries, had multiple skull fractures, gunshot wounds and “horrific” burns to her breasts.

“Sue was discovered amongst some trees, lying in a ditch,” writes Jana Boshoff, reporter for the [local Middelburg Observer newspaper](#). “Her rescuers managed to find her by following her groans of pain and then noticing drag marks from the road into the field.

“Her head was covered with a towel. Her eyes were swollen shut. She was partially clothed with just scraps of her shirt remaining. Her breasts and upper body was bloody. The plastic bag, shoved down her throat, took some effort to remove because her jaw was clamped down tightly.

“How she managed to breathe with the bag in her throat remains a mystery. One of her rescuers later recalled how Sue was unresponsive except for the constant groaning. Whilst the man ran back to the road to see if an ambulance has not arrived yet, she managed to curl one of her arms around her breasts in a last attempt to protect herself.”

She was rushed to hospital and placed on life support, but died two days later. Due to her British nationality, her murder attracted an unusual [amount of overseas media attention](#).

In any other country, such a crime would be almost unthinkable. But in South Africa, these kinds of farm attacks are happening nearly every day. This year so far, there have been more than 70 attacks and around 25 murders in similar attacks on white farmers.

Earlier this month, for example, 64-year-old Nicci Simpson [was tortured with a power drill](#) during an attack involving three men at her home on a farm in the Vaal area, about two hours drive from Johannesburg.

When paramedics arrived, they found three dead dogs, and the woman lying in a pool of blood, spokesman Russel Meiring told *News24*. “They used a drill to torture her,” police spokesman Lungelo Dlamini said.

Official statistics on farm attacks are non-existent, due to what human rights groups have described as a “cover-up” by the notoriously corrupt — and potentially complicit — South African government.

The most reliable numbers are released by the Transvaal Agricultural Union, which represents commercial farmers, and civil rights group AfriForum.

According to the TAU, last year there were 345 attacks resulting in 70 deaths — the highest death toll since 2008. In 2015 there were 318 attacks resulting in 64 deaths, and the year before there were 277 attacks resulting in 67 deaths.

In total, between 1998 and the end of 2016, 1848 people have been murdered in farm attacks — 1187 farmers, 490 family members, 147 farm employees, and 24 people who happened to be visiting the farm at the time.

While South Africa has one of the highest rates of violent crime anywhere in the world, the attacks on white farmers are no ordinary crimes.

In a 2014 report, ["The Reality of Farm Tortures in South Africa"](#), AfriForum wrote that "the horror experienced during farm tortures is almost incomprehensible".

"The well-known 'blood sisters' from the South African company Crimescene-cleanup have rightly indicated that, in their experience, farm tortures are by far the most horrific acts of violence in South Africa," the report said.

"They are of the opinion that the term 'farm murders' is misleading and that the terms 'farm terror' and 'farm tortures' are more suitable."

While sometimes farmers and their families are tortured to obtain information, such as the whereabouts of keys to the safe, human rights groups say the excessive brutality may be intended to send a message to the general farming community — get out of our country.

Victims are often restrained, harmed with weapons such as machetes and pitchforks, burned with boiling water or hot irons, dragged behind vehicles and shot. Female victims are often raped during attacks.

AfriForum warns that the attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated, military-style raids, but says community farm watch

groups and sharing of [information on WhatsApp and Facebook](#) were thwarting a “significant” number.

The three men responsible for killing Mrs Howarth — Themba William Yika, Nkosinathi Yika and Lucas Makua — were arrested soon after, and more than 150 farmers [turned up to demonstrate outside court](#).

But any form of justice is incredibly rare, and white farmers are [increasingly questioning their future](#). The number of white farmers in South Africa has [halved in a little over two decades](#) to just 30,000. Thousands [more farms are up for sale](#).

“The farmers live in fear, because being a farmer in South Africa is the most dangerous occupation in the world,” Henk van de Graaf, spokesman for the TAU, told [Swedish newspaper Nya Tider](#) last year.

“The average murder ratio per 100,000 or the population in the world is nine, I believe. In South Africa, it is 54. But for the farming community it is 138, which is the highest for any occupation in the world.”

Since 2007, at the direction of the government, South African police have stopped releasing statistics about the race of the victims. Monitoring group Genocide Watch says the cover-up has been exacerbated by American and European governments, which have “remained silent about the problem, reinforcing the campaign of denial”.

The rise in farm attacks has been blamed on [increasingly anti-white hate speech](#), particularly from the ruling African National Congress.

In 2010, high-profile ANC member Julius Malema sang [“Shoot the Farmer, Kill the Boer”](#), which Genocide Watch describes as “once a revolutionary song, but now an incitement to commit genocide”.

Malema was convicted for hate speech and the singing of the song was banned, but just seven months later president Jacob Zuma sang the song himself at an ANC event, in direct contempt of the

judge's ruling.

Malema was later kicked out the ANC, forming his own Marxist party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, which is now the third-largest party in parliament. Recently, Malema has been travelling the country urging black South Africans to [take back land from "Dutch thugs"](#).

"People of South Africa, where you see a beautiful land, take it, it belongs to you," Malema was quoted in *The Telegraph* as telling parliament.

Perhaps in response to populist pressure from Malema, Zuma earlier this month called for the confiscation of white-owned land without compensation. Zuma urged the "black parties" in the parliament to unite to form the two-thirds majority that would be needed to make the necessary change to the country's constitution.

Last week, [during a debate in parliament](#) about the farm attacks, an ANC MP shouted "Bury them alive!" while MP Pieter Groenewald was [speaking about the plight of white farmers](#).

"This is proof that the utterances of political leaders could lead to violence and murders and that the issue of farm murders is of little importance to the ANC," AfriForum's head of community safety, Ian Cameron, [said in a statement afterwards](#). "Certain members of the ANC were chatting during the debate and not listening nor partaking at all."

While right-wing groups have claimed South Africa is experiencing "white genocide", [Genocide Watch disputes that characterisation](#). According to the group's founding president, Dr Gregory Stanton, "early warnings of genocide are still deep in South African society, though genocide has not begun".

"The fact that farm murders do not comply with the legal definition of genocide in no way renders the crisis that white farmers in particular face in South Africa as less imminent," AfriForum deputy CEO Ernst Roets wrote in a report this month.

“It is important to note that not all who are murdered on farms are white people. On the other hand, it is equally important to note that black farmers are not subjected to the same levels of torture as their white counterparts.”

Australian rice farmer Graeme Kruger, who emigrated from South Africa to New Zealand in 1997 before coming to Australia in 2012, said an increasing number of white farmers were getting out.

“I would like to say, I certainly have never been and was never a supporter of the apartheid regime, and I certainly didn’t immigrate because I wanted to get away from South Africa,” said Kruger, now executive director of the Ricegrowers’ Association of Australia.

“We supported and openly celebrated the changes. But equally what is happening now is not right. To me it’s about humanity. Whether it’s the old apartheid regime or black-on-black violence or xenophobia, leaders need to be very careful with their positions and inciting violence towards anyone.”

Kruger’s family, like many, has been touched by violence. “My wife’s aunt — it wasn’t a farm situation — they broke in through the roof, stole her TV, tied her up with cords and she was killed,” he said.

Asked whether he feared South Africa [would become another Zimbabwe](#), where white farmers have all but been driven out, Kruger was uncertain.

“My family back in South Africa have chosen not to [get out], and they love living there,” he said. “They have a very hopeful, pragmatic view, but they are also concerned.

“South Africans have got this undying ability to believe in the bigger picture, and I’m talking about many blacks. There are lots of wonderful people of all colours that believe all of this stuff is wrong.

“The question I would ask, given the rhetoric, is there a future for farming in South Africa? It’s not just about, is there a future for white farmers. It’s three times more dangerous to be a farmer than

it is to be a policeman. It's sad — it's not what we want.”

frank.chung@news.com.au