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Trump Misleads Again With Claim of South Africa Farm Murders

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President Donald Trump built on his reputation for issuing misleading and false claims with a tweet late Wednesday asserting that there is “large scale killing” of farmers in South Africa.

Trump issued the tweet following a segment on Tucker Carlson Tonight, a Fox News program, in which the eponymous host examined a proposal by the ruling party in South Africa to expropriate farms from white landowners. Carlson called the policy racist, and interviewed an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute who criticized it.

“I have asked Secretary of State @SecPompeo to closely study the South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers,” Trump tweeted.

Carlson’s report didn’t mention murders of farmers and it wasn’t immediately clear where Trump got the idea. The White House didn’t respond to questions about the tweet.

The Anti-Defamation League issued a statement criticizing Trump’s missive, saying that it echoed white supremacists.

“It is extremely disturbing that the president of the United States echoed a longstanding and false white supremacist claim that South Africa’s white farmers are targets of large-scale, racially-motivated killings by South Africa’s black majority,” the ADL said in the statement.

There were 47 South African farmers murdered in the 12 months ending in March, according to Agri SA, a South African farm lobby. There were more than 19,000 homicides nationwide in the same 12-month span, according to law enforcement authorities. The number of farmers killed was about a third of the highs reached in the late 1990s, after the country’s majority-black population took power from its previous white minority government.

Trump’s tweet triggered a diplomatic dispute with South Africa’s government, which summoned the U.S. ambassador to explain the president’s “unfortunate comments,” according to the country’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation. The tweet also caused a selloff of the nation’s currency, the rand, which sank almost 2 percent against the dollar before paring losses.

South Africa has not seized or condoned the seizure of any white-owned farms to date and hasn't changed its constitution, although it is considering doing so. The constitution currently allows for expropriation of land if "just and equitable compensation" is paid, which some argue could include paying nothing.

European colonists stripped most of South Africa's black natives of their right to own property under a 1913 law. A government land audit released in February showed that whites own 72 percent of the country's 37 million hectares of agricultural land. Since 1994, when the ruling African National Congress replaced the apartheid government, the state has bought about 4.9 million hectares and assigned 3.4 million hectares to new owners.

Republican Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, a persistent critic of Trump who is retiring after this term, cautioned the president's use of Twitter to deliver messages on foreign policy.

"There's a danger in conducting foreign policy by tweet after viewing a single press report," Flake tweeted Thursday. "First, land reforms have been proposed in parliament in South Africa, but not yet adopted. Second, there is no "large scale killing of farmers" going on in South Africa."

Trump's tweet was the latest in a series of false and misleading claims he has made during his campaign and presidency. He has said without substantiation that 3 million undocumented immigrants cast votes for his opponent, Hillary Clinton; that former President Barack Obama spied on his campaign; and that he would not personally benefit from the tax cuts he signed into law last year, among many others.

Just 34 percent of voters trust Trump over news media to tell the truth about important issues, according to a poll July 25 by Quinnipiac University.