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Seizing land would send South Africa down the wrong path: U.S

Lesley Wroughton and Tiisetso Motsoeneng

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The United States warned South Africa on Thursday that seizing land without compensation risked sending the country down the wrong path, deepening a spat over Pretoria's efforts to fix a glaring racial disparity almost 25 years after the end of apartheid.

South Africa accused U.S. President Donald Trump on Thursday of stoking racial divisions in a late-night tweet in which he said he had asked U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to study South African "land and farm seizures" and the "killing of farmers".

Washington's charge d'affaires in South Africa, Jessye Lapenn, was summoned by the ministry of foreign affairs over the tweet, people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

Trump's comments inflamed an already heated debate over land ownership in South Africa, a country that remains deeply racially divided and unequal nearly a quarter of a century after Nelson Mandela swept to power at the end of the apartheid era.

Trump's tweet appeared to be a response to a Fox News report on Wednesday that focused on South Africa's land issue and murders of white farmers.

"The expropriation of land without compensation, our position is that would risk sending South Africa down the wrong path," State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said on Thursday.

"We continue to encourage a peaceful and transparent public debate about what we consider to be a very important issue in South Africa."

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced on Aug. 1 that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) plans to change the constitution to allow the expropriation of land without compensation, as whites still own most of South Africa's territory.

Writing in the London-based Financial Times on Thursday, Ramaphosa said: "This is no land grab. Nor is it an assault on the private ownership of property."

He has said any measures would not hit economic growth or food security. No land has been "seized" since the reform plans were announced, the ANC said.

His spokeswoman said Trump was "misinformed" and the foreign ministry would seek clarification from the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria.

“South Africa totally rejects this narrow perception which only seeks to divide our nation and reminds us of our colonial past,” a tweet from South Africa’s official government account said.

At public hearings, suggestions for expropriation included unused land, derelict buildings, circumstances where occupiers have strong historical rights, informal settlements and abandoned inner-city buildings, Ramaphosa wrote on Thursday.

And he said that the country would not make the same mistakes that other countries have made, alluding to the violent land seizures seen in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

“All of us would be concerned if they went the direction that Zimbabwe did. Right now it’s just a proposal in parliament,” U.S. Republican Senator Jeff Flake, who is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Africa subcommittee, said.

The State Department’s Nauert pointed out that Zimbabwe’s government had squashed civil society, shut down the media and destroyed an independent judiciary. “We have not seen that happen in South Africa,” she said.

South Africa’s far-left opposition firebrand, Julius Malema, who has led calls for the seizure of white-owned land, told Trump to stay out of the debate. “You have caused enough problems in Africa,” he told journalists.

Senator Cory Booker, the top Democrat on the Africa subcommittee, said Trump’s tweet showed a “painful ignorance.”

The ANC has long had a strained relationship with the U.S. Republican administration, mainly over U.S. support for Israel.

AfriForum, which mostly champions white people’s rights in South Africa, welcomed Trump’s announcement.

“Everyone in South Africa should therefore hope that the pressure from the USA will lead to the ANC reconsidering the disastrous route that they want to take SA on,” AfriForum’s CEO, Kallie Kriel, said.

He added that Trump’s comment came just three months after the organisation sent a delegation to the United States to brief Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson, and the Cato Institute think tank, on the situation in South Africa.

VIOLENT CRIME

Violent crime is a serious problem across South Africa and 47 farmers were killed in 2017-18, according to statistics from AgriSA, an association of agricultural associations. However the same figures show that farm murders are at a 20-year low.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the ANC has followed a “willing-seller, willing-buyer” model under which the government buys white-owned farms for redistribution to blacks.

Progress has been slow and most South Africans believe something has to be done to accelerate change, providing it does not hurt the economy or stoke unrest.

“Reforming the land distribution and ownership will be good for South Africa,” said independent political analyst Nic Borain.

“That there will be instability and worries about property rights is inevitable, but we don’t expect that the government will act in a way that radically destabilises investor security.”

Trump’s tweet came days after it was announced that his wife, Melania, would travel to Africa in October for her first major solo international trip as first lady.

In January, South Africa protested to the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria about reported remarks by Trump that some immigrants from Africa and Haiti came from “shithole” countries.

“This is a guy that calls those countries s-hole countries,” Booker said. “He’s shown a level of not just ignorance, but meanness, bigoted ideas.”