



Ted Cruz Staff, USAID Met With Group That Called Apartheid A ‘So-Called’ Injustice

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The leaders of a South African group that has referred to apartheid as a “so-called” historical injustice recently toured Washington and met with top members of the U.S. government, including officials at the U.S. Agency for International Development and staffers for Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas). They even bumped into national security adviser John Bolton.

AfriForum, an Afrikaner rights organization, promotes the idea that white people in South Africa are under attack by that country’s government. It has been trying to spread its message internationally.

During their meetings in Washington, AfriForum CEO Kallie Kriel and deputy CEO Ernst Roets handed out copies of Roets’ book *Kill the Boer*, which pushes the controversial claim that white farmers are being singled out for systematic violence in South Africa.

On Wednesday, Kriel and Roets met with USAID officials at the agency’s Washington headquarters. It’s unclear whether the officials were aware of AfriForum’s views prior to the meeting.

“USAID meets with a wide variety of organizations to gather perspectives on political, economic, social, and development trends in countries where we operate,” a spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, wrote HuffPost. “USAID programmed approximately \$258 million in FY 2017 resources in South Africa for programs that strengthen small businesses, create employment, improve job skills, promote basic education, combat gender-based violence, and promote HIV/AIDS care, prevention, and treatment.”

A spokeswoman for USAID declined to comment further. Roets would not say whether AfriForum is seeking funding from the development agency.

Also on Wednesday, Kriel and Roets posed for a photo with Bolton at a Fox News studio, according to National Security Council spokesman Robert Palladino. Bolton did not know the AfriForum leaders, Palladino added. But the duo tried their best to make an impression: They gave Bolton a copy of Roets’ book and posted the picture on Twitter.

AfriForum, which describes itself as a civil rights group, was formed in 2006 as an outgrowth of a white trade union. It focuses on the rights of Afrikaners, a South African ethnic group largely descended from Dutch and French Huguenot settlers. The organization has 280,000 dues-paying members, according to Roets.

Although AfriForum does not typically make explicitly racist statements, it often uses misleading or false data to characterize South Africa as a country in which white people are oppressed. When a South African land reform scholar tweeted statistics that undercut its claims about attacks against white farmers, Roets appeared to threaten her in a rant posted last Saturday on YouTube.

“Violent crime is a serious problem on farms, as it is in some urban areas in South Africa, but there is no indication that it is anything other than ordinary crime, and it certainly doesn’t justify a narrative of deliberate targeting of whites on the basis of their ethnicity,” said Nic Dawes, a deputy executive director at Human Rights Watch. “AfriForum uses the language of rights in pursuit of an agenda which is really about preserving white privilege in South Africa and elsewhere.”

A quarter-century after the end of white-minority rule in South Africa, the country’s white population still owns 72 percent of privately held farmland and a mere 10 percent of South Africans own 90 percent of the nation’s wealth. The post-apartheid government has bought up land for redistribution and assigned it to new owners, on the grounds that many were descended from black South Africans who unjustly lost their property during the colonial era and white rule.

But the idea of allowing the government to confiscate land without compensation has gained traction amidst public dissatisfaction with the governing African National Congress party. In February, the South African Parliament called for constitutional reform that might permit such initiatives to boost black land ownership.

AfriForum and others have seized on the idea of “land expropriation” as evidence of white South Africans being unjustly persecuted. They also claim that ongoing attacks on white farmers are racially motivated rather than part of the country’s broader problem with violent crime. Roets described the notion of expropriation without compensation to HuffPost as if it were an imminent policy change, rather than a proposal up for debate.

Experts on the South African situation say it’s unlikely that commercially vital white-owned farms will actually be seized and suggest the dispute is being exaggerated for political reasons.

AfriForum’s leaders traveled to the U.S. — stopping in Texas and Washington, D.C. — to raise awareness about violence against farmers and land expropriation, Roets said.

The AfriForum leaders also took their message to the studio of pro-white nationalist Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson and to the halls of Congress, where they met with staffers in Cruz’s office and “at least one” member of the House of Representatives, Roets said. He declined to name the member.

In addition, Roets and Kriel tweeted about meetings at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank; the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank; and the International Republican Institute, a democracy promotion nonprofit that receives U.S. government funding.

“We agreed that rule of law and property rights are essential components of economic development,” Marian Tupy, a senior policy analyst at Cato, told HuffPost in an email. “Conversely, expropriation without compensation is incompatible with tranquility and prosperity. [The] international community should do what it can to dissuade [the South African]

government from embracing catastrophic policies that destroyed Cuba, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.”

Asked about AfriForum’s apparently dismissive comment about apartheid being a “so-called” historical injustice, Tupy said there “should be no doubt that apartheid was a historical injustice” — and then suggested there were similarities between the current South African government and the apartheid regime.

“The current policies of [the South African] government are explicitly racist, because not all South African citizens are treated equally before the law (some people are favored over others, as was the case under apartheid),” Tupy wrote.

Roets disputes that AfriForum ever questioned whether apartheid was an injustice. In his telling of the story, an AfriForum legal representative used the phrase “so-called ‘historical injustice’” to refer to an argument from the opposing side during a court case over removing Afrikaans street names. The phrase was taken out of context, Roets told HuffPost.

Some in Washington appear to be persuaded by Roets’ narrative. “It is my understanding that AfriForum did not refer to ‘so-called’ injustices of apartheid; that we all agree that apartheid was an unjust system; that the words ‘so-called’ were lifted out of context to besmirch the reputation of AfriForum; and that a non-racial society based on individual, not group, identity ought to be the goal in South Africa,” Tupy wrote in an unprompted follow-up email that included Roets on the cc line.

But in its complaint laying out the facts in the court case, AfriForum “repeatedly refers to the Municipality’s attempts at correcting ‘so-called ‘historical injustices of the past,’” two judges on the Constitutional Court of South Africa wrote in a 2016 judgment.

Roets has also referred to apartheid as a “woolly concept,” a comment he stands by. “What I mean by that is that it is a term that everyone is talking about, but if you ask people what it means, everyone would give a different answer,” he said. “Racism is also a woolly concept, democracy is also a woolly concept, reconciliation is a woolly concept.”

Asked what apartheid meant to him, Roets said it was a “system of categorizing people according to the color of their skin and it was a system that failed miserably.” But he argued that the current South African government is engaged in the same kind of “government social engineering.”

Far-right groups in South Africa are working hard to win support abroad. They’ve received help from U.S. and Canadian commentators like Alex Jones, Ann Coulter, Mike Cernovich and Lauren Southern who have pushed their narrative of white persecution.

AfriForum’s work has helped “feed the efforts of the conspiracy theorists and hate networks that hope to create a globalized narrative of white victimhood,” Dawes of Human Rights Watch said. “The anti-immigrant and racist sentiment they peddle is too often informing the policy agendas of governments and political parties outside South Africa.”

Earlier this year in Australia — a popular destination for the nearly half-million white South Africans who have emigrated since apartheid ended — Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton pledged to issue fast-track visas to white farmers he called “persecuted.” The Australian government backtracked after official complaints from South Africa and a United Nations

statement urging Australia to save visas for people in greater need, like the hundreds of refugees it has detained offshore.

AfriForum's visit to the U.S. was a success, Roets said.

He appeared happily surprised by his group's ability to land meetings with American government officials. "We achieved much more than we thought we would — in terms of how we were received, in terms of the people we met with, who we were able to get in touch with," he said.

The Heritage Foundation, the International Republican Institute and Cruz's office did not respond to requests for comment.