

The village of Weenen lies some 30km north-east of Estcourt. The magisterial district, of which it is the centre, covers an area of roughly 1 200 square kilometres between the district of Klipriver, Estcourt, Umvoti, Mooi River and on its north-eastern edge, the Msinga district of KwaZulu.

Most of the area is dry thornveld country, suitable for stock farming. The Tugela River flows through the district, providing scope for some irrigation farming along the banks. Years of neglect have created a serious soil erosion problem.

Although there are a large number of white-owned farms in the district, many belong to absentee landlords who use these farms chiefly as labour reserves for other commercial farms in the Natal Midlands. The vast majority of the population are African.

About 900 Africans are living in a temporary 'Emergency Camp' on the outskirts of the village. The remainder are to be found living on the farms - perhaps some seven to eight thousand - and on a strip of Tribal Trust land on the north bank of the Tugela River.

There are two major tribes in the district, the Mtembu and the Mchunu. Boundary disputes, exacerbated by mounting population pressure and landlessness, have long been a source of friction and conflict between the two groups.

Before 1969, the labour tenant system of farm labour, long established in the district, offered these people a degree of residential security. Under this system a family paid for its right to live on the land by working for their white landlord for six months of the year, at a nominal wage. In 1969, as part of a concerted drive by the government to modernise white agriculture, the labour tenant system was outlawed in the Weenen district. Henceforth a farmer was entitled to have a maximum of five families living on his farm all of whom had to be working fulltime for him. All unauthorised families living on his land had to leave, to be resettled in KwaZulu.

Weenen was the third district in Natal to be affected by the ban, but the first where a large population was involved. It has been estimated that between ten and twenty thousand people were removed from their land, at times forcibly, and settled elsewhere. The large scale removals, the destruction of established communities, and the crowding together of desperate people on hastily erected 'Closer Settlement' villages on Trust land have left scars that are still clearly visible in the district today. For most of 1969, 1970 and 1971 the district was in turmoil.

Mass evictions began to get underway in the second half of 1969. Frequently they were accompanied by hutburnings and bulldozers to force out recalcitrant tenants. Many tenants who resisted moving were prosecuted. A Press statement issued by the Bantu Affairs Commission in October 1969 listed convictions for 291 kraalheads (2 246 people).

Because of the blanket ban on any stock entering KwaZulu from outside, tenants destined for KwaZulu had to get rid of all their stock, often selling cattle and goats for a third or a quarter of their actual value.

Originally the Government intended to resettle the bulk of the redundant tenants at Madadeni, a resettlement camp near Newcastle. These plans were thwarted, however by the resistance of the tenants, many of whom returned to Weenen as soon as the Government trucks had offloaded them at the camp.

Many hundreds crowded into the adjoining KwaZulu districts at Keates Drift, Tugela Ferry,

Mhlumba and Mashunka. Thousands more were finally accommodated in a 'temporary' re-settlement camp acquired by the Bantu Trust on land adjoining Tugela Estates. Here several 'Closer Settlement' camps were pegged out and each family allocated a half acre plot on which to build their house.

STATEMENT: 'A BAD man gave me a stand which had four poles at the corners and said that was where I could build my house. I was given a tent to erect on the stand. As soon as we had put a roof on the first hut, the tents were taken away for someone else. A water tanker was parked nearby so that we could get water to make the mud walls of our huts. The moment the tents were taken away, the tanker was also taken elsewhere'.

'There were no latrines We came from homes where the nearest neighbour was half a mile away and there were thick bushes to give one privacy. Now we were all living right on top of each other'.

'When we were moved we were told that we could not take our cattle and goats with us and that there was no land for us to cultivate because there were already too many in the location. They told us not to worry about this because we would soon be moving to a place of our own. Our buildings must be temporary because this was a transit camp'.

That was ten years ago. Today the people are still there. Since the mid-1970's this area has been repeatedly devastated by a series of deadly 'faction fights' between rival clans jostling for space, competing for inadequate resources, resentful, frustrated and increasingly hungry. In 1969/1970 most of the ex-labour tenants could become full-time migrant labourers in Johannesburg, Kimberly, Durban to support themselves and their families. During the 1970's, mounting unemployment in the cities has reduced these opportunities and it is becoming increasingly difficult for rural people to find jobs in town.

Yet although labour tenancy was formally ended in Weenen in 1969, both farmers and tenants have clung to the system tenaciously and it continues to operate under different guises throughout the district. In the ten years that have elapsed since the first removals, many of the former tenants have drifted back to their previous homes or to farms nearby. Some tenants are working fulltime for their landlords, but many are working some variant of the old and now illegal 'six month' system.

Sometimes the whole family is under an obligation to work for the farmer, sometimes only one member is required to do so. In some cases only the children of the tenant are taken on as labourers. Many are under threat of eviction and removal to Government resettlement camps as officials tighten up on labour controls. Others are at the mercy of their landlords and employers for permission to remain on the farms. These people are currently struggling to bring permanence and stability into their lives. Under present conditions they have no security of residence at all. If the farmer chooses to evict them they have no means of contesting him, no matter how arbitrary or unfair the notice may be. Numerous families have already been forced to sell their stock and move into already overcrowded communities in Msinga or surrounding 'Black Spot' areas.

Many tenants have alleged that they have been able to stave off threatened evictions in the past only by paying their farmer a 'fine' in the form of a cow or a goat. Others recite a story of constant removals. Evicted from one farm they approach the neighbouring farmer for permission to settle on his land, only to be forced to move on again at some later date.

The details vary but the general predicament remains the same. And so does the response of tenants when asked what they want - their right to live on the land and in the communities that they know, the right to keep their cattle and their fields and build for themselves a future where they are now.