

The long journey home



STAR soccer player, Jeremy "Brown Bomber" Mdluli was the first person removed from Charlestown in 1976. Seventeen years later, on November 6 1993, he was back at his original site, starting to rebuild his life. Mdluli was one of 48 landowners who are part of the first batch of former

Charlestown residents returning to their land.

Charlestown is one of only two forcibly removed Natal communities to have its land returned as a result of recommendations from the government-appointed Commission on Land Allocation.

About 105 000 people in Natal were removed from "black spots," such as

Charlestown - freehold or black occupied land falling in a white area.

In the happy emotion that rippled through the returnees, people joked about the hardships of the removal. They recalled that the "Brown Bomber" was so tall and the tin shack he was allotted in Osizweni so tiny, that his feet stuck out of the doorway when he slept.

Combined with the spirit of forgive and forget, now that the community's first battle was won, was a determination to survive.

"I forgive those whites who were living here when we were removed. I forgive them now because I have got back my land," said 76 year old chairman of the Bambisanani Bathengi Charlestown Committee, Solomon Makhubu.

Just over 8 000 people were forcibly removed from Charlestown between 1976 and 1978 and resettled in Osizweni, a KwaZulu township outside Newcastle.

After the removal, Charlestown was reduced to a ghost town and today there are almost no job opportunities. Trump Clothing, the only factory in the town, last month retrenched about 150 of its workers. About 5 km away is Volksrust, home of the AWB, where employment possibilities seem equally grim.

Despite the bleak outlook, the returning people want to make Charlestown a success story. The Charlestown Development and Allocation Committee, a body set up to coordinate the community's return, is making provision of water and roads for the area a priority.

To meet urgent education needs of the returning community, a building which operated as a clothing factory before the removal will be converted into a primary school by early 1994. And ESKOM is likely to be asked to extend its electricity supply.

Makhubu was adamant that former residents must play a key role in running Charlestown. "Nothing must be done without us," he said. "We must build one

community which includes everyone who lives in Charlestown. We must elect a body which can represent everybody."

Developing the town would be difficult, he acknowledged. "The removal made us poor. But we are going to have to sit down and plan what to do about job creation and see what is available to help us," he said.

White residents of Charlestown have agreed to work with the returnees to develop the area. Charlestown Advisory Committee chairman, part-time farmer and biltong maker, Petrus Schoeman, who initially opposed the community getting back its land, said now that people were back, whites should help to make the town viable for all its residents. "I want to leave farming and apply myself to helping the people who are coming back and making the town work again," he said.

He believes one option is tourism. "We are near Majuba and people like to visit such old battle sites. Mahatma Ghandi also passed Charlestown in his march to the Transvaal. He was stopped at Volksrust. We, Afrikaners, Africans and indians who live in Charlestown should try to trade on this rich history of ours. A lot of tourists pass Charlestown. We should make them stop here and develop some craft industry related to our history," he suggested.

Schoeman and his committee also want to integrate former Charlestown residents onto the Charlestown Advisory Committee which advises the Development and Services Board

administering Charlestown. Money for development in Charlestown comes from local rates - up to about R390 000 a year.

"We were looking at the committee maybe being made up of three representatives from the town proper and two each from Clavis and Clavis Extension," he said, "but we will wait until more people come back."

When asked his views about the community's forced removal in the 1970s, Schoeman said he would prefer to look to the future. "I'm sure they saw themselves as the victims but, at the time, we thought it would be better for them to be nearer a big industrial town like Newcastle. Looking back may open old wounds and is not always helpful. We are here now and we must look to the future," he said.

Nhlanhla Zwane and Signorant Dlamini, two young people who are returning, are doing just that. They are hoping for a more modern Charlestown under a new government, receptive to people's needs.

"We want to make a living from farming. We will buy additional land in Charlestown so that we can do this - if we can raise the money. We want electricity, tarred roads and clinics. And we want to vote for a government that will cater for the majority and who will hear what people need, not a government that just eats our money."