

# perseverance pays

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*The struggle of the Mogopa people is not yet over. But during the past three years they have shown what can be achieved by organised and sustained resistance.*

*Bethanie, Bophuthatswana. September 1987. A member of the Mogopa community, which was forcibly removed in 1985, waits to be transported by state trucks to Onderstepoort, near Sun City - the second move in three years.*



Paul Weinberg Afrapix

**I**n the early hours of 14 February 1984, government officials executed what they thought would be just another removal of a 'surplus people'.

Defying international opinion and local resistance, they forcibly moved the people of Mogopa from the land they owned, and trucked them to Pachsdraai, scheduled for incorporation into Bophuthatswana.

Three and a half years later, in September 1987, a committee representing the Mogopa community met Gerrit Viljoen, Minister of Development Aid, and after four hours of face-to-face negotiations, secured a landmark compensation settlement.

In terms of the settlement, the government has undertaken to purchase land that the Mogopa

people will hold in freehold title. They have been given the assurance that they will not be incorporated into a homeland and that they will retain their South African citizenship.

The community is now waiting temporarily at a site near Onderstepoort for the implementation of the undertaking that will, it deems match words, effectively negate much of what the government intended to achieve by their removal.

What happened in the intervening three years that brought the government to accept that it could not force the Mogopa people out of South Africa?

A look at the events shows that the key element was a dogged and determined resistance by a community that refused to give up

in the face of official coercion and breathtaking cynicism. What is strikingly apparent, looking back, is that the only party guilty of illegal and violent action was the government.

The illegal action was the removal of the Mogopa in the first place, according to an Appellate Division judgement handed down in September 1985. But by that time it was too late. The government had already expropriated the land.

State violence began even before the removal. While the tribe was still attempting to avert the removal through negotiation and appeals, the Department of Co-operation and Development was busy demolishing the schools, churches and the medical clinic the people had built. The authorities terminated the bus service to

Ventersdorp, removed the water pumps and refused to pay out pensions or assist in the application for 'reference' books.

The removal has been described by the Mogopa themselves:

'It was around 3 a.m. on 14 February 1984, when we suddenly hear a terrible noise ... A loud-speaker saying Bakwena be not afraid as we are the SA Police and we are here to protect you from your enemies ... We were shocked to hear our doors being kicked through ... They said we are here to take you to Pachsdraai as you don't want to go there ... pushing people forcefully into waiting trucks and buses. Those who refuse were beaten with batons ... People's belongings were left behind ... All livestock were left behind ... Most families were removed in this forceful manner ... Mr George Rampou was pushed in police van whilst handcuffed ... the tribe suffered a great deal of loss including furniture, livestock etc. Cattle were sold at a loss, eg R50 each and sheep at R10 each.'

Thus were the people loaded onto trucks and dumped at Pachsdraai. Refusing to remain, they fled to Bethanie, the home of their paramount chief. And in the months that followed, a once proud and independent tribe was reduced to the level of ragged, hungry squatters living in corrugated iron shelters. They were refused pensions. They were not allowed to meet together. They were not allowed to be in registered employment. The privations they suffered were acute. At a public meeting in August, addressed by a Mogopa spokesman, a sample of their drinking water was displayed in a cooldrink bottle. It was a dirty grey and speckled with floating particles.

During their stay at Bethanie, the government actually offered them alternative land, but the Mogopa turned it down as they could not accept the attendant conditions: they would not have had freehold title or security of tenure and they would have had to accept incorporation into Bophuthatswana.

Conditions at Bethanie continued to deteriorate steadily and the people began to talk about returning to their land, despite the grave risks involved. Supporters



Paul Weinberg/Altopix

*One of many meetings at Mogopa to resist the impending removal.*

tried to dissuade the community from embarking on a 'suicide mission', but their resolve was growing. During this period, three support organisations — the South African Council of Churches, the Black Sash's Transvaal Rural Action Committee and the Environmental Development Agency — began to investigate the possibility of securing other land near the original farms on which the people could safely settle. By this time the Mogopa had united with the Machavie people, who lost their own farms in 1971 and have been living 'temporarily' in Rooigrond for the past 16 years.

Finally a farm called Holgat, belonging to the Hermannsburg mission and classified for occupation by black people, was located and the purchase price of R2.8-million was raised. The deed of sale was signed and the money transferred. The Mogopa and Machavie people agreed that they would live there, together with the people already living on the farm. They had held two workshops to discuss its running and organisation.

All that remained was for the farm to be registered in the name of the new owner, the Botshabelo Trust, which had been formed to control the monies raised.

The Mogopa people had entered into the Botshabelo/Holgat project reluctantly, not as an alternative to returning to Mogopa, but as a fall-back position in case their plans did not succeed. But as the prospect of

a decent and independent life started to materialise, their spirits and enthusiasm rose.

They had reached decisions about housing, water, committees, migrant workers, the allocation of work and who should be allowed to live on the farm. The process was almost complete and a secure future was at last within their grasp.

At that late date, the government suddenly whipped the ground from under their feet by expropriating the farm, stating the land was 'urgently required' to set up a black agricultural college. A TRAC statement, underlining the inhumanity and cynicism of the government's action, pointed out that the farm had been on the market for years. 'It is apparent that the real reason for the expropriation is to satisfy the interests of the local white farmers,' TRAC said. Lucas Kgatitsoe, a member of the Mogopa tribe, said that the expropriation of Holgat, their last place of refuge, hurt the people more than can be imagined. They were peaceful people who had had their land removed. None of their efforts had been to any avail, he said.

Having tried every other option, the people resolved to move back to their land, and many organisations and individuals, who had till then attempted to dissuade them, declared their intention to support their defiance actively despite the great risks. A date was set, and arrangements were well advanced for the move, scheduled for early September.

At the eleventh hour Viljoen called a meeting with the Mogopa committee and agreed to the compromise that averted potential disaster.

But the people are not yet confident that the issue will be resolved. They have been disappointed and betrayed too often before. And they have not yet abandoned the hope that they may still be able to return to Mogopa. The months ahead will tell.

The Mogopa saga will go down in history as an apartheid classic — and as proof that organised resistance can achieve results. □

● **STOP PRESS:** The Mogopa committee had another meeting with Viljoen on 28 November, at which their hopes of returning to Mogopa were dashed.