

**When a White Farmer in Zimbabwe Gets Shot in the Face**  
**By RNW Africa Desk, Radio Netherlands Worldwide**  
**26 February 2013**

Farmer Piet Zwanikken was shot in the face, while standing outside his home on the tobacco farm in Mashonaland West that he's owned for the last 11 years. Although Zimbabwe's remaining white farmers may not regularly make headlines these days, pressure to get off land seems to be rising as the country's elections loom. Zwanikken says the trouble began a year ago when someone in the elite with political ties had set his eye on the farm. Here's his story as told to RNW correspondent Arne Doornebal.

On the 17th of December at about 7 o'clock in the evening, I heard a knock at my gate. My wife told me to be careful when I went out with my torch. My 14-year-old son followed me to the gate and, when I got within about ten metres, I shone the torch. I identified three of the people waiting for me as people staying on the farm for the last ten years. I knew them as trouble-causers who were part and parcel of helping remove me from the farm.

So, after greeting them by their names, I asked from a distance what they wanted. The shooter - I knew him very well - addressed me first. He said: "Good evening, Mr. Zwanikken, we have uncovered a big problem with tobacco being stolen from your field."

This was a ploy to get me closer. I did, in a way, smell a rat. But that ruse of saying my tobacco was being stolen drew me to the security fence. I went pretty close, I would say within two metres, to listen to their story. As I turned my head from listening to what the one guy was saying to the person on his left, the shooter brought up a handgun and fired. I saw this out of the corner of my eye, but it was too late to do anything. The shot didn't go straight, but ended up going through my nose and cutting through my right cheek.

Zimbabwe then and now

There used to be over 4,500 white farmers in Zimbabwe. We played an important role in the food production of this country. Today, less than 300 remain.

My father warned me. As a child he was thrown out of Indonesia, a former colony of the Netherlands. He never wanted to own land as he realized we could get expelled again. I only began farming in the late 1990s, soon after which, things turned ugly. The Zimbabwean government started taking land from white farmers and redistributed it to so-called veterans of the liberation war. But most people who were awarded farms were just political allies.

Our Riverhead tobacco farm measures 546 hectares. The government carved it up into 29 smaller farms. Soon after we were informed about this, a convoy of trucks stopped in front of our house, bringing 29 families and their belongings. Effectively, this meant that from 2001, we were without our own land on that farm. The only option to continue operating was to pay off these families. I gave them fertilizers, seeds and money. We found a way to live with it, but it wasn't easy. Each day people would knock on our door with problems they wanted us to solve. I spent 20,000 euros per year on these people, but still managed to make a living for my own family. In the end, we grew over a hundred hectares of highly profitable tobacco.

"I would mean business"

That night, my son and I reacted extremely quickly. We sprinted back to the house. My son was very traumatized. But we got in the house, we switched the lights off. I got one of my hunting rifles and fired a shot through the window, up into the trees, just to let those guys know I was OK and I would mean business if they tried to come in and finish the job.

Afterwards, they were rounded up. They claimed not to have been there, to have no knowledge of the shooting. Being very simple people, they were well represented by a lawyer and let out on bail for 100 dollars within two and a half weeks after the shooting. The whole thing is very political - a fat cat, someone aligned with the upper echelon of the Zanu-PF, has obviously done a lot of negotiating in the party to put pressure on the judge to release these people.

As the present political situation stands, it's going to be extremely difficult for me to remain on the farm with these killers at large. They might feel untouchable, having been let out so quickly after attempting a murder. They may just try this murder again, and I don't want to take that chance by being around.

© Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2013