

Govt ministers call for social accord in agriculture

CAPE TOWN: A social accord in the agricultural sector, based on improved human rights, can help South Africa to market its farm produce overseas and ensure stability in the sector, government ministers told farmworkers on Tuesday, 12 February 2013, during a dialogue session.

The Deputy Minister of International Relations, Marius Fransman, said a social pact between organised agriculture, farmworkers and the government - based on improved human rights in agriculture - was necessary.

This, while the Minister of Trade and Industry, Rob Davies, told farmworkers that South Africa would push to label its export produce as 'ethically produced'.

In a dialogue session led by the Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, farmworkers told government ministers about concerns over evictions, deductions made by farmers to their take-home pay and the increasing number of foreign nationals who were working on farms in the region.

Western Cape Cosatu secretary Tony Ehrenreich said about one million farmworkers have been evicted since 1994 because of a failure for farmers to work together with workers.

Ehrenreich said authorities had to take measures against the threat of some farmers who, he said, were evicting or sacking workers to spite the new minimum wage agreed to by farmers, workers and the government.

During a dialogue session earlier on Tuesday, farmers raised concerns about how the sector would remain competitive with the gazetting last week of the R105 minimum wage a day for farmworkers, and called on tariff increases and incentives to protect the sector.

Speaking to farmworkers at the dialogue, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, said any assistance that is offered to farmers, such as tax incentives or funding, would be linked to improving conditions for farmworkers.

The sector needed forums and even collective bargaining to ensure that farmworkers and farmers are able to sit around the same table.

She called on farmworkers to report any victimisation, including evictions, to authorities.

Violence in strikes was not the way to go as it would only see people lose respect and support for farmworkers, she said.

Western Cape MEC for Agriculture, Gerrit van Rensburg, also urged farmworkers to abide by the law and to report any incidents of crime to the nearest authorities.

For farmworkers wanting to report evictions, the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, Gugile Nkwinti, urged them to phone the department's toll free number 0800 007 095.

He also urged land claimants to submit applications for land claims as soon as possible, after President Jacob Zuma last month re-opened the land claims process.

The Department of Rural Development and Land Reform was also busy compiling a manual to assist applicants to make land claims, Nkwinti said.

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