

Farmers challenge expropriations

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Windhoek - Three German landowners launched a landmark court challenge on Tuesday to an order by Namibia's government to expropriate their farms, arguing they had been targeted for being foreigners.

Their lawyer told the high court that while the principle of expropriations was not in dispute, their particular cases breached an accord between the southern African country and the former colonial power Germany.

"The whole process was flawed because it contravenes a treaty signed between Germany and Namibia to protect investments of German nationals," their lawyer Adrian de Bourbon told a panel of two judges in the capital Windhoek.

"No consultations took place as stipulated by law and the expropriation is targeting foreigners, in this case German nationals," he added.

The farms were productive and contributed to Namibia's economy while several dozen people are employed, de Bourbon argued.

"We do not question land expropriation, but the way it was done."

All four farms are in prime agricultural areas in central Namibia.

Farm owners Gunter Kessler and Christine Riedmaier were present during proceedings which were due to continue on Wednesday.

Kessler owns two farms, Gross Ozombutu and Okozongutu West, while Riedmaier owns Welgelegen. The third landowner, Adolf Herburger of Heimerde, was absent.

Kessler said it was premature to comment on the case.

"At this stage I do not want to make any comment," he told AFP. "Let us wait until the two-day court hearing is completed."

The Namibian government started expropriations two years ago "in the public interest" but no criteria have been made public.

Five white-owned farms have been expropriated so far - three from Namibians and two from German national Klaus Schindler. In each case, compensation for land and infrastructure was paid and the expropriation was not challenged.

The start of proceedings on Tuesday marked the first time that expropriations had been challenged in the courts.

The issue of land expropriation has been a hot topic in southern Africa since Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe launched a land reform programme which has seen about 3 000 white farmers lose their land.

Unlike Namibia, Mugabe's regime has refused to compensate farmers for their land although it has shelled out to cover the cost of developments such as farmhouses, dams and roads. - Sapa