

Land reform slow

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OKAHANDJA – The willing buyer, willing seller policy introduced by Government after the watershed land conference held in 1994, is not yielding desired outputs as was envisaged, says Deputy Minister of Lands and Resettlement, Henock ya Kasita.

He added that a new method to hasten land acquisition is needed.

Introduced in 1995 and implemented under the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act of 1995, (Act 6 of 1995), as well as the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Amendment Act of 2003 (Act 14 of 2003), the willing buyer, willing seller policy has been government's primary tool for acquiring land for resettlement purposes.

Under this scheme, farm and land owners willing to sell their land can make a formal offer to Government, who then after valuations, buys the land to resettle landless Namibians. The scheme is mainly designed to buy land from white Namibians and foreign landowners and redistribute it to about 240 000 landless black Namibians.

In addition to the concept, over the years Government has also adopted a policy of "expropriating a selected number of farms in Namibia for resettlement", while still partially following the willing buyer, willing seller concept.

This was done in accordance with the constitution and against the payment of just compensation for expropriated farms.

But challenges confronting the ministry have been the high prices farm owners charge Government, which hampers the process of land acquisition.

"The slow pace at which land has been acquired, especially during the financial year 2009/2010 has reached a critical point. This clearly demonstrates that the willing seller, willing buyer concept does not yield desired outputs," said Ya Kasita at a workshop for ministry's staff in Okahandja yesterday.

Last year, the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement bought five farms for N\$3 million, with a further eight farms still in the pipeline despite the fact that prices and other terms have already been agreed upon.

The ministry says it hopes to have those deals concluded before the end of this financial year in April.

The process is being slowed down by arbitrarily inflated land prices and the "unavailability of productive land", says the ministry's permanent secretary, Lidwina Shapwa.

Government says it cannot afford to pay the prices charged by farmers as most of the farms offered are of low quality, mostly located in non-productive areas while some are without infrastructure such as boreholes.

"It will be a waste of taxpayers' money to buy land that is not suitable for resettlement

purposes," Shapwa told New Era on the sidelines of the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement meeting at Okahandja.

The concept has come under severe criticism from institutions such as labour unions. Unions have long called for an alternative.

Government is now working on the consolidation of the two land reform laws – the Agricultural Commercial Land Reform Act and the Communal Land Reform Act.

Once these two Acts are consolidated into one Land Act, it would provide an opportunity for improvement in the administration of all land in Namibia with the exception of urban land and national parks.

The consolidated Land Bill will also provide and extend the powers of the current Lands Tribunal to hear disputes for all agricultural land.

The tribunal is currently limited to commercial farmland only.