

South Africa in a tiff over Trump

Donald Trump's latest tweets have caused great concern in South Africa

Donald Trump's latest comments on land transformation in South Africa have caused an uproar in South Africa.

It has generally been condemned as an effort to divert attention from president Trump's own problems in the US, and most observers say it is not helpful to South Africa in the debate to resolve its own internal matters.

The South African Minister of Communications stated that the issue of land was very important in South Africa and its resolution, in a calm way and in order to grow the South African economy, was vital for the country.

Other government spokespeople commented that Trump had no understanding of what is happening in the country, noting: "His utterances are regrettable but we prefer to take this up directly with the American government".

Controversial politician Jules Malema bluntly told president Trump to stop interfering in South Africa, while senior ANC member, Zizi Kodwa, called President Trump an embarrassment to the American people. "He is part of a right wing lynch mob that uses fear factor to protect status quo and white supremacy," Kodwa stated.

Trump said he asked the secretary of state to keep a close eye on what is happening in South Africa in terms of land. He also suggested that the South African government has started seizing the land of white people, fuelling the racial debate in both countries.

Some observers say that South Africa is now firmly in the crosshairs of president Trump and his administration. Ironically, in the 1980s, American policies on investments in South Africa started the slide of the Apartheid Government. Now president Trump may target the new South African government which, since democracy in 1994, has been much revered by the Americans.

Trump's statements come after a week of fairly positive developments in the land debate in South Africa. Agri South Africa, the national farming body, met with president Cyril Ramaposa at his invitation in Cape Town, and emerged from the meeting in a positive mood.

In parliament the president set out his strategies, while in Johannesburg a meeting between the government and business leaders also drew positive comments.

This seemed to suggest that there is a broader debate developing on the land issue in South Africa which may well remove some of the emotion. The latest statements came from parliament's Portfolio Committee on international affairs, which stated that commercial farmers, mostly white, are enormously important for the development of the South African economy and alleviating poverty.

Trump's comments have projected AGOA, the American Growth and Opportunities Act, to the fore. AGOA was renewed two years ago to benefit exports from African countries to the US, while at the same time American poultry producers were allowed to export their frozen chickens to South Africa under much reduced tariffs. Recently, South Africa's poultry producers have asked the SA government to rescind the previous decision.

At least one conservative thinktank in the US has asked president Trump to exclude South Africa from AGOA because of the country's expropriation of land without compensation.

As the war of words between politicians ramp up, there may well be other casualties.

Citrus growers in the Cape will have watched the latest developments with great concern. Although South African citrus exports to the US are a relatively small portion of total citrus exports, it is an important market for Cape growers, and exclusion from AGOA will change things tremendously.

Fuelled by right wingers in both countries, and with the unpredictability of the Trump administration, the situation could easily blow out of control.