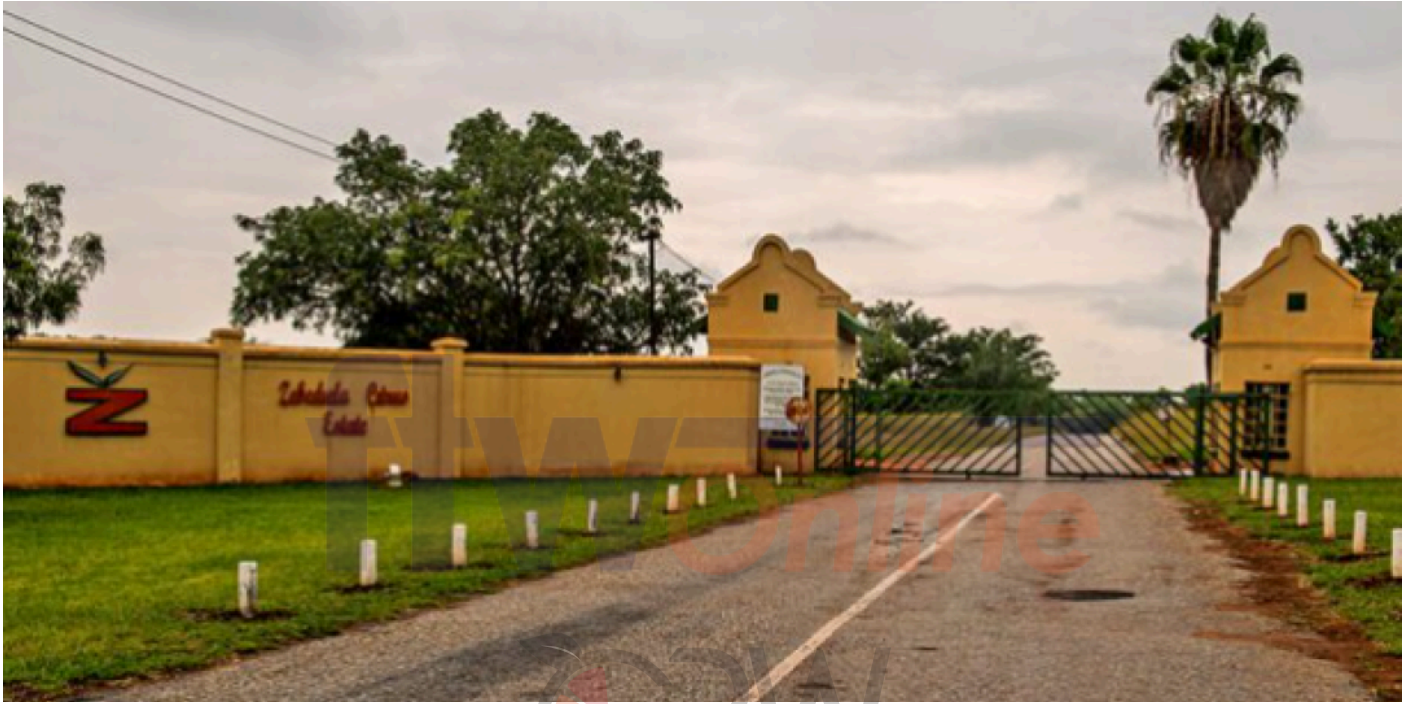


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Legendary citrus farm packhouse burned to the ground

29 Aug 2023 - by Staff reporter



The entrance of Zebediela Citrus Estate. Source: Gallo Images

1 Comment

The Zebediela Citrus Estate south of Polokwane was once the jewel in South Africa's citrus crown, exporting about three million oranges per annum at the height of its 3000-hectare production capacity.

At one stage it was the largest citrus producer in the southern hemisphere, employing about 200 people, mostly from the surrounding Batladi community.

But in 1998, a land claim was implemented against the previous owners of Zebediela by a communal property association (CPA) representing the community.

In 2003 that process was finalised when the ownership and operations of Zebediela were transferred to the Batladi CPA.

What was set in motion thereafter resulted in a slow period of decay marked by mismanagement, malfeasance, in-fighting, fat-cat interference, court cases, High Court liquidation orders and the looming threat of the farm's closure.

Over the past weekend, the dismantling of Zebediela was brought to near-completion when a 50-year-old sorting, packing and storage facility was burned to the ground.

It was the third fire on the derelict farm this August, the same month in which a court ruling for Zebediela's final liquidation is expected.

According to Ike Kekana who chairs the Save Zebediela Citrus Estate Committee, arson could have caused the destruction of the packhouse from which 75% of Zebediela's cases of oranges were once exported abroad.

Limpopo Province police spokesperson Malesela Ledwaba, confirmed that a case of malicious damage to property is being investigated.

The spate of fires at Zebediela follows recent eviction orders against labourers living on the farm that is facing a serious liquidation threat for debt of R170 million owed by the B-CPA.

A Covid-19 recovery pledge of R500 million by the government as far back as 2020 apparently never materialised.

According to Kekana about 100 permanent workers will be unemployed if Zebediela goes under.

Apart from all the controversy that has dogged Zebediela since about 2016, several complaints were forwarded for the farm's dive in production – water scarcity, load shedding, the lack of operational budget and orchards that had apparently reached yield maturity with no new trees being planted.

Antiquated infrastructure in the once-functioning packhouse was also given as a reason for the farm's plunging production figures.

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