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South Africa Faces Its Greatest Challenge Since Liberation:
Redistribution of Land, as Seen in POV’s “Promised Land,”
Tuesday, July 6, 2010, on PBS

Amid Rising Tensions, Land Remains the Young Country's “Ticking Time Bomb”

A co-production of the National Black Programming Consortium, American Documentary/POV
and the Diverse Voices Project

“Land is the issue; it’s the straw that could break this camel’s back. If we don’t all grow beyond our
positions of the past in the way we tackle this issue, we will fail together collectively.”
– Roger Roman, Land for Peace, South Africa

Promised Land tells the story of two bellwether legal struggles over land in today’s South Africa. In
one, an impoverished community seeks the return of 42,000 acres of rich farmland now in the hands
of white farmers and developers; in the other, an extended, middle-class black family claims 3,800
acres owned by a few white farmers. The black South Africans have family and tribal traditions and
the ugly history of black expulsion from the land to make their case. They also have the government
led by the African National Congress (ANC), which promised upon taking power in 1994 to
redistribute a third of the land within 10 years.

On the other side are white landowners, whose deeds and bills of sale buttress their passionate
belief that they should not be made to pay individually for the collective crimes of apartheid. In this
belief, surprisingly, they are supported by the same ANC-led government that promised to
redistribute the land. The contradiction in government policies, a compromise strategy meant to
appease white fears during the transition to democratic rule, has worked out mostly to the
disadvantage of black South Africans. A decade and a half after the inauguration of black majority
rule, less than 5 percent of the land has been redistributed. Promised Land is a timely alert that the
patience of South African blacks, waiting for economic as well as political enfranchisement, is
running out — that the hour hand has advanced dramatically on South Africa’s “ticking time bomb.”

Yoruba Richen’s Promised Land has its national broadcast premiere on Tuesday, July 6, 2010, at
10 p.m. on PBS as part of the 23rd season of POV (Point of View). POV continues on Tuesdays
through Sept. 21 and concludes with a fall special. (Check local listings.) American television’s
longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a Special Emmy for
Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking as well as the International Documentary
Association’s 2009 IDA Award for Continuing Series.

With behind-the-scenes access to landless blacks, white landowners and beleaguered government
functionaries, Promised Land is a gripping insider’s account of the social and human stakes in
South Africa’s struggle over land. When filming for Promised Land started in 2004, there were
some 22,000 active land claims filed by South African blacks that were awaiting resolution. Many of them had been “in process” for years and were finally being decided.

In Promised Land, the 9,000-member Mekgareng community wants the government to return the 42,000 acres from which it says its forebears were expelled 40 years ago. The group is opposed by 260 white owners. Leading the landowners is Johan Pretorius, who has deeds for his land dating back to the 1850s, well before the community’s expulsion and even before the Native Land Act of 1913 (which banned black ownership of land). The Mekgareng have only one letter making reference to their forced expulsion. Though they are poor and lack the resources of the wealthy landowners, the Mekgareng have dynamic and able leaders, including Philip Rafedile and Solly Selibi.

The 1,000 descendants of Abram Molamu, led by Kathy Motlhabane, Steve Bogatsu and Pinky Gumede, have the advantage of being educated and having the means to afford lawyers, but they face the determined resistance of Hannes Visser, a farmer and meatpacker. Molamu originally purchased farmland in the Lichtenburg area in 1895; his sons later divided up the land but were forced to sell it to the government in the 1940s. The land was subsequently owned by a succession of white farmers. Visser believes the question of whether the Molamu family sold the land to whites willingly or under compulsion makes no difference in his case, since he acquired his property in 1968.

The individual dramas of the antagonists in both cases — equally passionate about their rights to the land — take place against the larger drama of a black African government trying to temper the economic expectations and frustrations of the black majority. Promised Land portrays a government fully aware of the potential for social conflict and reluctant to stoke the fires. With regard to land reform, the ANC has committed itself to a market-based “willing seller, willing buyer” model. In actuality, however, there are few willing sellers. In the view of many critics, the process instituted by the government ostensibly to encourage legal claims has only served to slow and even bury claims. In any case, few landless blacks can match the legal proofs of ownership possessed by the land’s current owners.

Roger Roman is one white landowner in Promised Land who defies the norm in these growing conflicts. Faced with joining his fellow landowners in evicting black “squatters,” including one man who had lived his entire 103 years on the land, Roman did an about-face. He went on a hunger strike to protest the eviction, gave his land back to the descendants of its original inhabitants and founded the organization Land for Peace.

The political compact made by the ANC with the apartheid regime, which exchanged majority rule for a suspension of questions about economic justice, was intended to save untold numbers of lives. But as black majority rule nears its 20th anniversary, South Africa’s blacks are organizing themselves to right the economic injustices of their history. As shown in Promised Land, under pressure from Molamu’s descendants, the government for the first time forces a white landowner, Hannes Visser, to sell property — in this case a farm and meatpacking plant that has employed many blacks. While Visser tries to rebuild his life, the forced sale of his land ignites a political uproar that pushes South Africa’s ticking time bomb closer to zero hour.

“It’s going to put me back quite a long ways; I won’t have sufficient funds to buy another farm,” says Visser. “I can’t prophesize, but it’s only in the future that we will see whether this process is a successful process or is it a wrong process, where we’re undoing wrongs in the past by repeating the wrongs in the future. . . . But when the whistle blows, irrespective of if it had been a fair win or not a fair win, the game is over. So you start a new game.”

Government official Blessing Mphela notes that the challenges for blacks continue after redistribution. He says, “As we are restoring land to our people we’ve got to recognize that [as] part
of the apartheid racial dispossession of land they’ve lost their skills in using the land, because we are talking about four, five generations down the line.” Kathy Motlabane, one of descendants of Molamu who now own the land, notes, “It’s exciting but you know what? It’s also fearsome because it’s a big challenge. I think the most difficult thing is post-settlement. When the land has been given, what next?”

“To me, the land struggle in South Africa is emblematic of how all post-colonial societies are dealing with race, reconciliation and reparations,” says director Richen. “Though there was great tension and mistrust among the Mekgareng and the Molamu descendants on the one hand, and the white landowners on the other, all sides freely shared their lives, feelings and opinions with me. I believe they did this because they share a desire to tell the story of their country in transition, reflecting a shared belief in South Africa’s future.”

Promised Land is a co-production of Promised Land Film, the National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC), American Documentary | POV and the Diverse Voices Project, with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

About the Filmmaker:
Yoruba Richen (Director)
Yoruba Richen is a journalist and documentary filmmaker who has worked on films that have aired on HBO, A&E and BET. She was the co-producer of Take it From Me, a documentary exploring the effects of welfare reform on New York City women, which was broadcast on POV in 2001. Richen was also an associate producer for the investigative unit of ABC News, as well as a producer for the independent radio and television news program Democracy Now. She is the recipient of numerous grants, including a Fulbright Award and a Diversity Development Fund grant from the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

Richen, who received a bachelor’s degree from Brown University and master’s degree in city planning from the University of California, Berkeley, is an adjunct professor at the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism. She is currently developing The New Black, a documentary that examines the complicated, combative and overlapping histories of the African-American and LGBTQ civil rights movements. Richen was born and raised in Harlem in New York City and currently resides in Brooklyn.

Credits:
Director/Producer: Yoruba Richen
Associate Producer: Nadine Wilmot
Editor: Jessica Reynolds
Cinematographer: Shandu Nesengani
Original Music: Kathryn Bostic

Running Time: 56:46

POV Series Credits:
Executive Producer: Simon Kilmurry
Vice President: Cynthia López

Awards & Festivals:
• Fledgling Fund award for Socially Conscious Documentaries, 2009
• Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2010

The National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC) was founded in 1979 and is dedicated to developing black digital authorship and distributing unique stories of
the black experience in the new media age. Since 1991 NBPC has invested over $7 million in iconic
documentary productions for public television; trained, mentored and supported a diverse array of
producers who create content about contemporary black experiences; and emerged as a leader in the
evolving next-media landscape through its annual New Media Institute and New Media Institute: Africa
programs. NBPC also distributes engaging content online through its social media portal
Blackpublicmedia.Org, an online home for enlightening black digital content and engagement.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 23rd season on PBS in
2010, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American
television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers.
Airing June through September, with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300
acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, POV’s
Borders. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent
nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues.
More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
POV’s award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending
the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and
community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV
Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, POV’s Borders. In addition,
the POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their
favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives
form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

POV Community Engagement and Education
POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings
and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a
leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of
resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, POV’s Youth
Views works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may
use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities
are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community
participation.