

# MK Vets strongarm claim

## Conservancy land hijacked amid dispute between claimants

CHELSEA PIETERSE

ALLEGATIONS of intimidation, illegal clearing of land and threats of violence from MK Veterans surround an eight-year-old land dispute near Ashburton.

It has been alleged that members from the Mkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) have been commissioned by one of the parties in the dispute to guard the land, however, the association has denied any knowledge of this.

MKMVA Moses Mabhida regional secretary Menzi Mkhize said they knew nothing about the involvement of their members in the whole saga.

"No one from the local leadership in that area has ever contacted us about that."

"I suspect that someone is taking advantage of the situation and is using Mkhonto," he said.

The dispute between the Azibuye Emasisweni Trust beneficiaries and one of the trustees, Cyril Bafana Shabalala, came to a head at the beginning of July when protected land in the Lower Mpushini Valley Conservancy area was cleared allegedly on Shabalala's orders.

Residents in the area banded around the beneficiaries, saying the clearing of the land was illegal as it is a protected area with protected species of Aloe.

The Preservation of the Mpushini Mkhondeni Biodiversity Trust chairperson, Pandora Long, said the land owners in the Lower Mpushini Valley and Mpela (Mpushini Protected Environment Land Owners Association) organised a meeting with the beneficiaries and spokesperson Musa Mchunu on July 24.

However, they were blocked by heavily armed guards in MK uniform.

One woman, who would not be named as she feared for her life, said she was at the meeting when she saw one of the MK vets shouting at several beneficiaries. "I told him to calm down and that the beneficiaries had every right to go down to their property."

"After a lot of pushing and shoving, I called Magma Security, because I at first thought he was a Magma guard.

"He said: 'I am not from Magma. I am the boss. I am from the MK Security Rank.'"

She said she then saw the MK badges on the uniform and when she looked down, the man was pointing a gun at her stomach.

"My heart was beating at 100 miles per hour but I remained composed and some of the beneficiaries rallied around me."

The woman said that there were other "soldiers" with the man but that they were all in their early 20s and did not look like they were part of MK.

"Then the man took photos of everyone's registration plates who had parked in the area."

Shabalala, however, said he had not hired any MK veterans.

He added that beneficiary spokesperson Musa Mchunu and the community were not the rightful landowners. "We are the legal trustees. Mchunu thinks they are but they are not."

"We are interacting with the Department of Environmental Affairs. We just want to resettle on our land," he said.

However, Mchunu said Shabalala could not be a member of the trustee board as neither he nor his forefathers had lived in the area.

Mchunu said Shabalala did not have the interests of the community at heart and wanted to develop the area, which the community is against.

"We don't want buildings. Our vision is to extend the conservancy with eco-tourism and agricultural activities."

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife spokesperson Musa Mntambo said that the issue did not fall under their mandate but the mandate of Environmental Unit of the Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (EDTEA).

"Three weeks ago our conservation officer went there and advised people that clearing aloes was illegal as it is a specially protected plant," said Mntambo.

"The group seemed to have been ignorant of this and they promised that they will not remove them. We went there few weeks ago and noted that they are no longer removing aloes."



Councillor Michael Wensley points to the plot of land in a conservation area near Ashburton that has recently been cleared, allegedly illegally.

BELOW: An uprooted aloe on the land. The area is protected because of the aloes that grow there, and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is concerned about the damage to the plants.

PHOTOS: IAN CARBUTT



"In fact they are securing them. We cannot do anything as they, so far, seem to have adhered to our requirements."

However, when *The Witness* went to visit the plot of land yesterday, uprooted aloes and trees lay scattered across the land.

There was also a man wearing an MK

veteran uniform stationed at the entrance to the property when *The Witness* left.

The Department of Environmental Affairs did not respond to queries yesterday. The beneficiaries are making arrangements with the conservation association to restore the area.

**"We don't want buildings. Our vision is to extend the conservancy with eco-tourism and agricultural activities." – Musa Mchunu, spokesperson for Azibuye Emasisweni Trust beneficiaries.**

**"We are the legal trustees. Mchunu thinks they are but they are not." – Cyril Bafana Shabalala, Azibuye Emasisweni trustee.**

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