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Farmer counts cost after protesters burn property, crop

STAFF REPORTER

THE owner of an Eshowe sugar-cane farm almost destroyed after angry protesters set fire to the crop and buildings is still calculating the cost of the damage.

Dr Fikile Qoboshiyane, who also practises as an ophthalmologist in Durban's CBD, said on Friday night that while his farm is insured he needed to assess the total damage.

Nearly all the sugar cane on his 225-hectare farm as well as workshops, cottages, staff quarters and the main farmhouse were burnt to the ground on Wednesday night

and Thursday morning. Qoboshiyane's farm was one of three targeted by the protesters.

He said it is likely that the fire would have an effect on employment. However, he said it was too early to confirm this.

The sugar cane harvesting season, which often absorbs large amounts of temporary labour in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, runs from April to December.

The riot was reportedly sparked after 29-year-old Sphamandla Xulu was shot and killed by a farm-watch security guard on Qoboshiyane's farm.

It is alleged that Xulu and

another man were fishing illegally at a farm dam and refused to leave when asked to do so. This led to an altercation and the fatal shooting. The other man was unharmed.

On Thursday, about 300 residents took part in the arson attacks and barricaded the R66, which links Eshowe with Melmoth and Vryheid, with burning tyres and rubble.

The SAPS reported that calm had been restored to the community on Friday morning but they were keeping a close eye on the area.

"Nearly my entire crop was destroyed by the fire, as were the homes on the property,"

said Qoboshiyane.

Having owned the farm since 2004, he said he spent all of Friday speaking to the uMlalazi Municipality, his farm manager and the police in Eshowe.

"Thankfully, no one was in the house when it was set alight. We are just busy trying to manage the situation.

"The local municipality informed us they would communicate with the family of the deceased," Qoboshiyane added.

The security guard accused of fatally shooting Xulu is in police custody and has been charged with murder.

His employer is Durban-based V1 Security, which provides farm-watch guarding services to the commercial farmers in the area.

A V1 Security company manager, Nathaniel Zwane, who answered the telephone of his employer Nelson Mhlongo, said a statement would likely be released tomorrow.

He said Mhlongo was currently out of the country.

"At this point we have no information except to say our guard is still in custody. We should know more by Monday after we do our own investigation," he said. – African News Agency (ANA)