

Republican » Losing everything during land grabs in Zimbabwe: One man's journey for justice

Die Republikein by Tanja Bause

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Every day I am astonished by the generosity and open-hearted hospitality of all the Namibian farmers along the route. It is truly remarkable. Every detail is considered, and everything is carefully planned and meticulously worked out in advance.

"I thought the part of my journey would be the most difficult - now I can only say that this part is blessed. God is clearly among so many of you. May His goodness and love grow within us. May His justice reign over all of us."

So said Ben Freeth - riding from Zimbabwe to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal in Windhoek - about the help he has received from farmers and people since he entered Namibia at the Katima Mulilo border.

Ben, the executive director of the Mike Campbell Foundation, began his "journey for justice" in central Zimbabwe on November 28, 2023.

BACKGROUND

Mount Carmel farm was the largest producer of mangoes in Zimbabwe; they also cultivated cotton and tobacco. The farm also boasted a linen factory and lodge and employed more than 500 Zimbabweans.

After a court order, the farm was invaded, and the houses were burned down, including the workers' houses. The crops were destroyed, and the animals were slaughtered. Ben, his wife, father-in-law, and mother-in-law were abducted and beaten. His father-in-law, Mike Campbell, died two years later due to complications from his injuries. Ben founded the Mike Campbell Foundation in his honour; the foundation focuses on restoring justice, law, and human rights in Zimbabwe.

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Ben and Mike took former President Robert Mugabe to the SADC Tribunal's human rights court over his government's chaotic and cruel land grab program. "It was at the SADC Tribunal in Windhoek on November 28, 2008, where a historic ruling was made that allowed us to stay on the farm.

"Unfortunately, the Zimbabwean government ignored the ruling. The very productive farm is now in ruins, like so many others. After the ruling, Mugabe effectively dismantled the SADC Tribunal," Ben said.

"This long journey is to raise awareness about the need to appoint judges so that the SADC Tribunal can continue to function as it should.

"We all need individual property rights and justice for the nearly 400 million people in southern Africa. When injustice prevails, there is only destruction and ruin that follows. Everyone needs justice where we are all equal citizens, treated equally before the law, whether we are rich or poor, black or white, old or young," Ben said.

NAMIBIA

After Ben and his horse Tsedeq rode about 800 kilometres to the border [with Zimbabwe and Namibia], he contacted Dr. Ian Baines to find out if he could bring his horse into Namibia.

He was advised to rather get a mule in Namibia. The wheels were set in motion, and Dr. Telane Greyling departed from the south of Namibia with a mule to pick up Ben. Ben and Nikao travelled another 400 kilometres through the Zambezi Region (formerly the Caprivi Strip) with Telane's support.

According to Jorie Oosthuizen, a farmer who rode 60 kilometres with Ben, a mule gets very lonely if there are no other horses or mules nearby.

"Nikao turned around three times and ran back to Katima. Ben had to chase after him - the last time Nikao ran about 30 kilometers. We had to come up with a different plan," he said.

Telane contacted Megan Wiese of Chahanic Stud and Safaris.

"She took Stardust to Rundu, and the two of them tackled the next kilometres. Telane greeted Ben at the Mururani gate," Megan said.

Telane transported his luggage to the gate, as well as food and water for Stardust.

"Ben only asked for water for his horse. He would fill his own water bottle, carry his little luggage and food. I started the WhatsApp group and asked for water for the horse, but in the true Namibian spirit and as our people are, the farmers along his route took action.

"They bring water for him, leave water along the way, bring lunch for him, offer accommodation and food for him. They even wash his clothes. Ben wanted to camp along the way with his horse, now he sleeps in a bed," Megan said.

CHAHANIC STUD AND SAFARIS

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After about 150 kilometres, Stardust's feet began to hurt, and Johan Luttig found Ben by the roadside and offered Johnny for him to hopefully ride to Windhoek.

"I'm in tears every time I think about the farming community and how they just help and give. Ben inspires so many people to be generous and kind, and it's contagious. His spirit brings everyone together," Megan said. Johan is Jorie's father-in-law, and after Jorie heard about Ben and his journey, he and a few friends saddled up their horses and met Ben on the Rundu road.

"We rode with him through Grootfontein and a little further. The others then turned back, and I continued with him until almost in Kombat," Jorie said.



Ben with Johnny

"Ben's case is close to the hearts of many farmers, and what he fights for is everyone's cause. "He fights for what is right and what is wrong, what is truth and what is a lie. He fights for property rights and that every person, regardless of who or what you are, has the right to own property, and the government must protect you."

"As we rode, I realized he is a deeply religious person and that he does it out of faith. He does it for all Zimbabweans, regardless of their language or colour who have been affected by the land grabs," Jorie said.

Ben wants to arrive in Windhoek on 18 March and to ride to the SADC Tribunal. Many farmers and horse owners have already said that they will accompany him on that day to support his cause and for justice.

"Thank you for your solidarity. May March 18th be a wonderful and historic day as we enter Windhoek on our way to the SADC Tribunal and pray and work for the reinstatement of that Tribunal - and for justice for all.

"If anyone has a horse, I would like you to join me on March 18th in the plight of Zimbabwean farmers and their workers and other victims of injustice," Ben said.



Ben on his journey for justice

Thys de Vries, a farmer from Zimbabwe, posted the following on the WhatsApp group: "Ben Ride for Justice": "Hello Ben and all the beautiful people of Namibia. Ben, your family and yourself have given so much of your time and stand on the right side of justice for all of us. My family and I, and the Zimbabwean displaced title deed holders spread all over the world who have lost our properties, like you and your family have, thank you from the depths of our hearts for bringing our cause back into the spotlight and standing up for what is right. Stay strong and safe.

"To all the Namibians who open their time, homes, water stations, horses, and freezers for Ben and his horse during his long journey for justice, we from Zimbabwe say thank you very much. Your hospitality, assistance, and guidance make me proud to have farmer's blood that pumps through my heart and veins.

"God's blessings to all of you west of us, you are incredible."

People who want to follow Ben's progress can do so on the Mike Campbell Foundation's website and the Facebook page:

<https://www.mikecampbellfoundation.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/MikeCampbellFoundation/>