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Libyan uprising sinks hopes of South African farmers

17:34 (GMT+2), Fri, 11 March 2011

Libya's constrained agricultural capacity, which resulted in the country having to import the majority of its food at great expense to the consumer, played a part in the uprisings currently being witnessed, according to South African cane farmer Charl Senekal. Issue date: 18 March 2011

He visited Libya in 2009 with Agri-SA deputy president Theo de Jager, Agri Gauteng president Andre Botha and journalist Stephan Hofstätter, then working for Farmer's Weekly. They were there because Muammar Gadaffi had personally expressed an interest in importing SA agricultural expertise to resurrect collapsed Libyan farms. Senekal remained in high-level contact with Libya's agriculture department until the start of the uprisings.

"We were waiting for bilateral agreements to be signed between the SA government and Libya. No South African farmers actually went to Libya, but there was a lot of interest," he explained. On 4 March Massod Ahmed, the director of the International Monetary Fund's Middle East and Central Asia Department, told Sky News that food shortages were partly to blame for the uprisings in Libya and elsewhere. "The increase in food prices has certainly been an important trigger, a spark if you like, to these demonstrations," he said.

The article Hofstatter wrote on his return from Libya described a country of great agricultural opportunity, given the government's inter-basin water transfer ambitions, but one that was also 90% desert and that imports 75% of its food.

SA farmers were to have played a major part in realising this potential and mitigating the tension over high food prices. Libya was going to put up all the money, explained Senekal. The main project was a 40 000ha plantation of 5,7 million olive trees, all 80 years old and therefore in their production prime.

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million olive trees, an 60 years old and therefore in their production prime.

Libya's agricultural department expected to realise 100kg per tree, at an income between R80 and R90 per tree, resulting in R5 billion in income just for the harvest – "a very exciting prospect", as Senekal puts it.

"The other thing was dairies – Gadaffi has got four or five dairies that can collectively accommodate about 12 000 cows. Coupled with this was a 60 000ha irrigation project, free water and free electricity to feed the cows. The milk price was going to be roughly \$1/ā,". "The final one was a chicken project, where you could slaughter 300 000 chickens a day, with the Libyan government as the customer, at an income of about R35 a chicken."

However, as Libya tips into civil war, all deals are off for now. "Somebody phoned recently to say people are setting fire to the olive trees, but I can't see how they would achieve that because the spacing is 20mx20m, so they'll have to torch individual trees, and that will keep them busy until the 22nd century," said Senekal.

"From an agricultural point of view it's a shame, but democracy must happen," he added. "We could see that people were repressed. Women had no rights at all." Meanwhile, Senekal said he received calls from the Saudi Arabian government recently, expressing an interest in South African agriculture.

"They're looking to make big investments, especially in vegetable production. They're worried the same thing is going to happen there." – Staff reporter

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