Hope grows in former killing fields as it seeks to become bread basket again

Published: 07 Jun 2010
Short URL: https://farmlandgrab.org/13576
Posted in: Angola South Africa UAE

The National | 7 June 2010

Petrus du Toit, left, the head of agriculture for Ridge Solutions, is overseeing work on a farming venture for the company (Photo: Lauren Lancaster / The National)

by Bradley Hope

Agriculture in revival after farms turned into battlegrounds

Petrus du Toit, a veteran South African agricultural economist, looked out on a small field of sweet potatoes, cabbage and onions being cultivated by two farmers and their children.
“This land was once the centre of a vast farming economy,” Mr du Toit says. “Now we are slowly getting started again.

The farmers, Antonio Huila, 25, and Justin Luanda, 26, were raising a modest set of crops that mark the beginning of Angola’s return to its status as the breadbasket of Africa.

In 1974, Angola exported US$180 million in coffee alone, or about $796m (Dh2.92 billion) in today’s money. But during the civil war that lasted from independence in 1975 to 2002, the countryside where the farmers now work became killing fields.

The city of Huambo, known as New Lisbon in the colonial days when it was one of Portugal’s main economic engines in Africa, saw some of the worst fighting.

Its once regal buildings are pockmarked with bullet holes and some areas are still being cleared of landmines. The wide avenues that in the 1960s hosted the International Nova Lisbon 6 Hours sports car race, sponsored by companies such as Café de Angola, are now overgrown and falling apart.

The small field where the two farmers were irrigating their crops with water from a spring is part of what will become a 3,000 hectare agriculture operation called Cokengo.

Mr du Toit, who heads the agricultural efforts of an Angolan company called Ridge Solutions, is overseeing the transition of the land into a modern operation that will produce tens of thousands of kilograms a year of potatoes and other crops.

“We plan to have invested $1bn in farms within five years,” he says. The same farmers who make a meagre existence with their simple tools will be incorporated into the larger operation.

By all accounts, the lands of Angola are blessed. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that it has 3 million ha of arable land, including large pasture grazing areas in the south.

The country has 25 per cent of the water resources of Africa. Before the war, it exported coffee, maize, sisal, bananas, tobacco and cassava around the world. Now it imports most food products.

The government has committed to building infrastructure and providing finance to expand farming and incentivise people to move back into the rest of the country from the burgeoning capital city of Luanda.

Small coffee farms have been started again in the north of the country.

But for companies starting up large-scale farms, the challenges are numerous. There is little infrastructure to handle the production of crops.

A drive from Luanda to Huambo can take up to 12 hours. The storage facilities and transport routes have been all but destroyed by fighting and neglect.

“Your have to address the whole distribution chain,” Mr du Toit says. “From trucks to roads to refrigeration, it is a big expense.”

Even so, his company is planning to create its own food brands to be sold in the Angolan market and create joint ventures with foreign investors to expand its agriculture portfolio. Through its office in Dubai, Ridge Solutions is aiming to bring in investors from the GCC.

While much of Huambo has been cleared of landmines, the country is still in the middle of a long-term project to
Rory Forbes, the programme manager for a British non-profit mine-clearing and weapons disposal group called The HALO Trust, says 900 identified minefields have been cleared or found not to be dangerous. Another 800 still needed to be cleared.

“This place was covered in mines,” Mr Forbes says.

Over the past 12 months four explosions occurred near a military base in Huambo as residents tried to move into new lands, he says. HALO has removed 71,000 mines so far, including 58,000 anti-personnel mines and 22,000 larger anti-tank mines.

As he stands by an old abandoned Portuguese colonial barn with a collapsed roof, Mr du Toit says the agricultural challenges are still being calculated but Huambo’s farms will rise again. HALO recently found a cache of live ammunition on the farm site, which will soon be destroyed.

“This area saw a lot of war and many of the houses still bear scars,” he says. “But if it was once going to be the new capital of the Portuguese empire, then it can be great again.”

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Source: The National
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