

Fact check: Were 400 white South African farmers murdered last year?

Posted Wed 4 Apr 2018 at 11:10pm, updated Thu 12 Jul 2018 at 2:42am



Baseless

Former prime minister Tony Abbott says that 400 white farmers have been murdered in South Africa over the past 12 months. (ABC News: Matthew Roberts)

The claim

The plight of South Africa's farmers caught the attention of local politicians recently when Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton [suggested](#) white farmers were being persecuted and deserved "special attention" under Australia's humanitarian immigration program.

Defending Mr Dutton's comments, former prime minister Tony Abbott [told 2GB's Ray Hadley](#) "there is a very serious situation developing in South Africa. Something like 400 white farmers have been murdered, brutally murdered, over the last 12 months".

Mr Abbott made his claim on March 19, 2018, four days after Senator David Leyonhjelm urged Australia's immigration and foreign affairs ministers to help South Africa's farmers.

In [letters to both](#), he said: "In the last year more than 400 white farmers have been killed."

Were 400 white South African farmers murdered in the last year? RMIT ABC Fact Check investigates.

The verdict

Mr Abbott's claim is baseless.

There are no official statistics available for the past 12 months.

The most recent police statistics show that 74 people were murdered on farms in the year to March 2017.

That figure is well below the 400 claimed by Mr Abbott. Moreover, it includes all farmers, workers, families and visitors and all races.

More recent figures, which identify white farmers, are available from the Transvaal Agricultural Union, a group representing the interests of farmers.

According to their figures, there were 84 farm murders in the 2017 calendar year. Of these, 59 victims were white farmers.

A further 15 people, including 8 white farmers, were killed on farms in the first three months of 2018. That means fewer than 70 white farmers were killed in the last 15 months.

The police's latest data does reveal a rise in farm murders compared with the previous year, as does the union's data.

However, experts told Fact Check that these changes reflected a general increase in murders across the entire South African population since 2012.

The context

Farm violence has long plagued South Africa. In 1998 then president Nelson Mandela told a [summit on rural safety](#) and security:

"The government deplores the cold blooded killings that have been taking place on the farms in the past few years. While killings on farms, like crime in general, have been a feature of South African life for many decades, the incidents of murder and assault in farming areas have increased dramatically in recent years."

Between 2001 and 2014, the country's human rights commission [conducted three inquiries](#) into human rights violations in farming communities, and in 2001 the police minister appointed a committee of inquiry into farm attacks.

As the inquiry's 2003 [final report](#) explains:

"Farm attacks may take many forms and can be executed in various ways. It can happen on any day of the week and at any time of the day or night. It can take place inside the house or outside. Many different crimes can be committed during the course of a farm attack. All kinds of weapons can be used in the attack, and anything of value can be stolen. Some attacks leave the victims unharmed, in other cases they are killed or seriously injured. Some attackers have a clear motive, others not."

Such attacks can include assault, rape, murder and at times, torture — examples of which are [documented](#) by the Afrikaner civil rights group AfriForum.

Johan Burger, a senior researcher with South Africa's Institute for Security Studies, told Fact Check

that while crimes such as assault are already serious, they take on "a completely different character" when committed on a farm.

This, he said, is at least partly due to the location of victims.

"Unlike urban areas, farms and smallholdings are much more isolated and removed from immediate police or other security assistance, including close neighbours," Dr Burger said.

"This relative isolation provides attackers with much more time and freedom to commit their often atrocious crimes against their victims."

According to [police evidence](#) to the human rights commission, farms are particularly vulnerable "due to the perception that farmers are rich and keep firearms and cash on the premises (for example to pay wages)".

What statistics are available?

Mr Abbott referred to farm murders in the last 12 months.

The South African police service collects official statistics on "[farm attacks](#)", which includes murders on land used for commercial and non-commercial agricultural purposes.

The figures are collated for the financial year, which in South Africa runs from April 1 to March 31.

But these are not released regularly. That's because, [police have said](#), the statistics would need to be audited.

The most recent figures, for the year to March 2017, were [made public](#) by MP Pieter Groenewald, leader of the pro-Afrikaner political party, [Freedom Front Plus](#).

His figures for 2010-11 to 2013-14 differ slightly from those [previously supplied](#) by the police to the human rights commission in 2014.

Chris de Kock, the former head of the police's Crime Information Analysis Centre, has [compiled](#) the police data available for the years to March 2014.

The police did not respond to Fact Check's request for up-to-date figures.

However, non-government advocacy groups have begun to collect and publish their own — and these are more recent.

The [Transvaal Agricultural Union](#) of South Africa is one such group, formed by farmers to "ensure a productive and safe existence for its members".

Its data is collated for the calendar year, and includes year-to-date figures.

So there is no figure corresponding precisely to Mr Abbott's claim for the last 12 months, but there are figures for all of 2017 and for 2018 to date.

Another group that publishes farm murder statistics is the Afrikaner civil rights group [AfriForum](#). They did not respond to Fact Check's questions about their data, so this has not been analysed.

But they have [previously said](#) that the most reliable, independent source of farm attack statistics was



the Transvaal union.

Identifying the victims

According to Mr Abbott, 400 "white farmers" have been brutally murdered.

But the available police data does not identify farmers or white victims. A "farm murder", by their definition, covers any victim who happens to be on the farm.

In 2001 South Africa's police minister appointed a committee of inquiry into farm attacks, which reported that [69.7 per cent](#) of attack victims were farmers or their family, and [61.6 per cent](#) of victims were white.

Those figures on all farm attacks, now 17 years old, say little about the murders recorded in the 2016-17 financial year.

The union, though, does record extra information about each victim's race and association with the farm. This makes it possible to identify the white farmers Mr Abbott spoke of.

What the data says

The police data shows that in the 2016-17 financial year there were 74 people murdered on farms — far short of Mr Abbott's 400.

[Farm homicides in South Africa by financial year](#)

Data from the [agricultural union](#) shows that 82 people were killed in farm attacks during 2017, including 59 white farmers and 2 black farmers.

In the first three months of 2018, a total of 15 people were murdered, including 8 white farmers.

These totals are reported by calendar year so aren't directly comparable with the police data reported by financial year.

The police's data shows an extra 16 farm murders in 2016-17 compared with the previous year, a return to levels not seen since 2010-11.

The union's data shows an increase of 11 murders of white farmers in 2016 and a further 10 in 2017.

[White farmer murders in South Africa by year](#)[Farm murders by race in South Africa](#)

Can the farm murder count be trusted?

The figures are credible to a degree, although both datasets have their limitations.

For one thing, there are whole years missing from the police's published data.

Dr de Kock told Fact Check that the police's farm murder count was reliable.

But he said the "biggest problem" with the data was that police stations do not specifically record hate-based murders or "farm murders".

"So a murder, wherever that murder happens, whatever the motive for that murder, will just be

registered as a murder."

Dr de Kock also pointed out that more than half of farm attacks or murders take place on "small holdings", usually plots of one or two hectares on the edge of towns and cities.

"In many cases people don't actually farm on those," he said, explaining that while some people might farm on a small scale, "strictly speaking [they're] no commercial farmer".

Dr Burger said the lack of regular government statistics on farm attacks and murders makes it "extremely difficult to accurately define the extent of the problem".

But he also said the union works hard to ensure the credibility of its data, which he relies on himself.

And according to Dr Burger, murder statistics reported by different groups tended to be similar.

In 2014 the union [told](#) the human rights commission they sourced their figures from police, media and social media reports.

Dr Burger explained that because the union doesn't have the same reach as the police, it also relies heavily on reports from its members.

He suggested that the differences between the two sets of murder counts, before 2012 especially, was because the union's own monitoring process only began from 2008.

The union cautioned that the data provided to Fact Check may not be absolutely accurate, as there may be victims over the years that they were not aware of.

The bigger trend

Though Mr Abbott singled out farm murders and said a very serious situation was "developing", experts said these aren't the only crimes increasing in South Africa.

Dr de Kock said the uptick in police-recorded farm murders during 2016-17 reflects a general increase in murders.

While farm murders are important, he said, "it is too early to say there's something developing in that small little category [of murders]".

And Dr Burger said the upward trend in the agricultural union's data "correspond[s] with the gradual increases South Africa seems to be experiencing with murder and house robberies since 2011-12."

Though it doesn't explain all farm attacks or murders, he said, "there is some correlation between the trends".

Research: David Campbell, Senior Researcher; Natasha Grivas, Researcher, RMIT ABC Fact Check

Sources

- [Peter Dutton, Interview with Miranda Devine March 14, 2018](#)
- [Tony Abbott, Interview with Ray Hadley, March 19, 2018](#)
- [Senator David Leyonhjelm, Facebook post, March 15, 2018](#)

- [Nelson Mandela, Speech to the rural safety and security summit, October 10, 1998](#)
- [SA Human Rights Commission, Safety and Security Challenges in Farming Communities, August 19, 2015](#)
- [Committee of Inquiry into Farm Attacks, Final report, July 31, 2003](#)
- [AfriForum, The reality of farm tortures in South Africa, June 26, 2014](#)
- [South African Police Service, National Rural Safety Strategy 2011](#)
- [Pieter Groenewald, Huge increase in farm murders in 2016/17, October 26, 2017](#)
- [AfriForum, Farm attacks and farm murders, April 26, 2017](#)
- [Africa Check, Factsheet: Statistics on farm attacks & murders in SA, May 8, 2017](#)
- [Transvaal Agricultural Union, Farm murder statistics 1990-2018 \(March\)](#)