



**LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTRE**  
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## **INFORMATION ABOUT NAMIBIA'S LAW**

### **The infamous “Red Line”: Why does Namibia have a veterinary cordon fence?**

#### **Background**

Namibia's veterinary cordon fence (VCF), also known as the Red Line, is a stock disease control mechanism that protects Namibia's beef exporting industry from stock diseases such as foot and mouth and lung sickness.

Over the years, Namibia's beef exporting industry has built a reputation as an industry that is committed to high standards. This has enabled Namibia to export meat to countries in the European Union and other countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway and South Africa. In 2020, Namibia became the first African country to export red meat to the United States.

In the 2017/18 financial year, Namibia's agricultural exports contributed N\$5.77 billion to the Namibian economy. Of this amount, N\$3.4 billion came from beef exports, while the rest came from exporting sheep and goat, charcoal, grapes and trophy hunting.

Beef exports clearly play an important role in the Namibian agricultural economy and stringent disease control measures are crucial in sustaining Namibia's beef exporting industry.

#### **The “Red Line”**

However, the history of the Red Line is a controversy that dates back to the early years of Germany's colonial rule over Namibia. In 1896 Namibia suffered a serious outbreak of rinderpest (or cattle disease) which had a devastating effect on its livestock production. It is estimated that the OvaHerero communities lost up to half their cattle herds at the time. German settlers who mostly lived in the central and southern parts of Namibia at that time, also suffered severe losses. To protect German herds from future epidemics, a veterinary cordon fence was introduced in 1897 which resulted in Namibia being divided into a northern and southern part. The fence became known as the Red Line, because it was printed on maps in red ink. The fence spans the north-central parts of Namibia from the Atlantic Ocean to Botswana.

The Red Line soon also became a political boundary in German South West Africa. The area south of the Red Line became known as the area inside the Police Zone, while the area north of the Red Line became known as the area outside the Police Zone. The implication of this was that the area within the Police Zone was directly under the governing control of the German colonial state, while the area outside the Police Zone was ruled indirectly through a system of appointed traditional authorities. In effect, this boundary separated Namibians living in the north from white settlement areas to the south, although not all indigenous groups of South West Africa lived north of the Police Zone.

Under South Africa's apartheid rule in Namibia, the Red Line served not only as a veterinary control, but also acted as a physical barrier restricting the movement of black Namibians north of the line to the south of the line.

Through the years, the fence has become an unwelcome reminder of Namibia's colonial and apartheid past. With Namibia's independence in 1990 and with the growth in exporting beef to the international markets since, many of Namibia's livestock herders have raised their discontent about the continuing existence of the Red Line arguing that it denies them the same economic opportunities as those livestock herders living south of the fence.

Recently, the Red Line has also become the focus of a legal challenge against the Namibian government. The Mayor of Windhoek, who is the plaintiff in this matter, complains that the government's veterinary cordon fence rules and regulations are not sanctioned by law, that it is discriminatory against a certain section of the Namibian population and that it violates both Articles 8 and 10 of the Namibian Constitution which respectively protects the dignity and equality of all Namibians.

### **Efforts to remove the Red Line**

The government is aware of the political, economic and legal challenges associated with the Red Line's status and has led several discussions with stakeholders since independence over its removal, but mostly without success. The key reason for this is that the import of animals and animal products entails certain risks for the receiving country. Introducing animal diseases could impact negatively on the receiving country's people, animals and environmental health. Thus, countries normally prefer to import animals and animal products from countries that have a similar or better animal health status. Furthermore, exports are negotiated at a bilateral level between exporters and importers and as a result there is often no standard set of rules and regulations that applies to animal health issues.

Another problem affecting Namibia's northern regions is the difficulty of controlling stock diseases on the Angolan border. While proposals to move the fence to the Angolan border have been considered in the past, it remains impractical because of the continuous movement of family livestock herds across the Namibian-Angolan border. Also, erecting a new fence at the border would be very expensive.

To add to the complexities, Namibia continues to experience sporadic outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in its northern communal areas, meaning that its beef exporting industry could be at serious risk if the fence is not kept intact.

As was the case during the 1991 National Land Conference, the removal of the Red Line was again one of the focal points of discussion at the Second Land Conference in 2018. Some of the resolutions that came out of the 2018 conference included the establishment of a body to purchase livestock from the northern communal farmers to give them an avenue to markets beyond the veterinary cordon fence; the renovation and upgrading of abattoirs in communal areas to Class A abattoirs so that meat from the area could become suitable for export; and the procurement of the produce of northern communal farmers through the public procurement system. While these resolutions are all concrete suggestions for supporting livestock herders north of the Red Line, it is unclear whether any progress has been made in realising them since 2018.

### **The way forward**

The Namibian government plays a vital role in both the removal of the Red Line and the protection of Namibia's meat exporting industry. It has a duty to adhere to the principles of the Namibian Constitution

and remove the fence, which for many Namibians remain a symbol of Namibia's colonial and apartheid history.

However, at the same time, the Red Line helps keep livestock south of the fence disease-free, making it possible for Namibia to export its meat and earn revenue for the country. This protection comes at a cost to livestock herders north of the fence who do not enjoy the same protection as their compatriots in the south, because they cannot export their products to earn revenue from them.

The reality at the moment is that the export of meat continues to play an important role in Namibia's agricultural sector, and thus needs continuing protection from the government. Without the veterinary cordon fence protection, Namibia risks losing not only its international reputation as a top-quality meat exporter, but also much needed foreign currency to support the Namibian agricultural sector, which has seen a steady decline in both investment and growth since independence.

Much time has been spent debating the future of the Red Line since independence, but little has been done to create true and equal opportunities for livestock herders north of the Red Line. The resolutions taken at the 2018 land conference would be positive steps towards improving the situation for livestock herders north of the Red Line. However, a significant level of commitment, coordination and investment in both capital and human resources is required to realise better opportunities for everyone in Namibia's agricultural sector.

*This column was produced with support from  
Bread for the World and the Hanns Seidel Foundation.*