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EXPLAINER

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Why has Trump given white South Africans refugee status?

Trump stirs controversy by calling Afrikaners, a minority group descended from Dutch colonists, victims of a 'genocide' in South Africa.

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People from the first group of white South Africans granted refugee status for being deemed victims of racial discrimination under U.S. President Trump's Refugee plan

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Earlier this year, the Trump administration [offered to resettle Afrikaners](#), descendants of European colonial settlers in South Africa, stating that they face harassment and violence in their country. At the same time, he froze aid to the African nation. (X)

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As the group arrived at Dulles International Airport near Washington, DC, US Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau told them: “I want you all to know that you are really welcome here and that we respect what you have had to deal with these last few years.

“We respect the long tradition of your people and what you have accomplished over the years,” he said.

How is Washington justifying special treatment to Afrikaner refugees?

In a news conference on Monday, Trump doubled down on claims that white people have been subjected to systematic violence since the end of apartheid, or white minority rule, in South Africa.

The Afrikaner community are descendents of mainly Dutch settlers who established apartheid in 1948. Under apartheid, whites could seize land and resources from the Black population, who were relegated to “Bantustans” or overcrowded townships.

Although apartheid ended in 1994 – when the African National Congress won the first racially inclusive democratic election in South Africa – most commentators agree that racism persists today, with many Black people still disproportionately lacking access to land, resources and opportunities.

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In January, President Cyril Ramaphosa introduced a [new law](#) seeking to address land ownership disparities – which have left three-quarters of privately owned land in South Africa in the hands of the white minority – by making it easier for the state to expropriate land.

Ramaphosa has insisted that the law does not amount to land confiscation, but creates a framework for fair redistribution by allowing authorities to take land in the public interest without compensation only in exceptional circumstances, like when the area is abandoned.

Shortly after the introduction of the Expropriation Act, Trump wrote on his Truth Social account: “South Africa is confiscating land, and treating certain classes of people VERY BADLY... the United States won’t stand for it, we will act.”

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Washington has said it agreed to grant Afrikaners refugee status after the introduction of the law.

Trump is also at odds with the African nation’s [prominent position](#) in the International Court of Justice’s case accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.

Is there a ‘genocide’ risk against white South Africans?

“It’s a genocide that’s taking place,” Trump told reporters at the White House, a claim that has drawn criticism from South African officials and the international media.

Trump’s claim echoes white nationalist beliefs that South Africa’s legislation aimed at rectifying apartheid is now, in fact, discriminatory against the Afrikaner community.

Right-wing organisations, such as the Afrikaner lobby group AfriForum, have been championing a narrative that Afrikaners are under an existential threat.

Elon Musk, the South African-born tech billionaire and a close ally of Trump, is perceived by many as an ally of the Afrikaner cause.

He has repeatedly posted his outrage on X against what he claims is unfair treatment of white South Africans – even going as far as claiming a “white genocide” was occurring.

Still, South African whites own most of the country’s private land and have about 20 times more wealth than Blacks on average. In corporate South Africa, white individuals occupy 62 percent of top management positions while 17 percent of leadership roles are held by Black managers.

And even statistics provided by AfriForum and the Transvaal Agricultural Union – also a group sympathetic to white farmers – show that the total number of farmers, across all races, killed every year numbers about 60. This is a country that sees 19,000 murders in all, annually.

Some [younger Afrikaners](#) have taken to social media to mock the asylum offer, posting parody videos that highlight the [privileges white people enjoy](#) in South Africa today.

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How has South Africa reacted?

In March, the [South African government](#) called Trump's claims that Afrikaners face persecution "completely false", noting they have remained among the richest and "most economically privileged" groups.

On Monday, President Ramaphosa told an Africa CEO Forum in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, that "we think that the American government has got the wrong end of the stick here, but we'll continue talking to them."

Ramaphosa said he had spoken to Trump about the issue.

The South African president said the far-right Afrikaners seeking refugee status were a "fringe grouping", adding that they are "anti-transformation and anti-change [and] would actually prefer South Africa to go back to apartheid-type policies. I said to him [Trump] that I would never do that."

Ramaphosa also revealed that he is set to meet with Trump soon regarding the issue.

What's the status of US-South Africa relations?

Tensions between the Trump administration and the government of South Africa are [high](#), with the US [expelling South Africa's ambassador](#) in March due to criticisms of Trump.

The Trump administration is also at odds with Pretoria's prominent position in the International Court of Justice's case against Israel, which stands accused of genocide in Gaza.

Another major flashpoint was the abrupt pause in US aid funding in January and the dismantling of USAID operations in South Africa. This particularly affected the PEPFAR program, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

In 2023 alone, South Africa received roughly \$460m in PEPFAR funds, covering nearly 18 percent of the country's total HIV/AIDS budget. The

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Is this consistent with US refugee law and policy?

Yesterday’s arrival of dozens of Afrikaners into the US comes as the Trump administration blocks nearly all other refugee admissions and leans into rhetoric about an “invasion” of immigrants from poorer nations.

Speaking from Washington, DC, Al Jazeera correspondent Patty Culhane said the Trump administration “has made a priority of getting these people [white South Africans] into the United States”.

Meanwhile, people fleeing widespread violence and persecution in countries such as Haiti and Afghanistan face a [closed door](#).

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