

Lord faces lawsuit over development protest

By Fiona Govan in Madrid

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When plans were unveiled for a controversial golf course development in a UNESCO protected area in Andalusia in southern Spain last year local residents came out in force to protest. They signed petitions, organised demonstrations and gave their views to the local press.

Chief among them was Lord Kilmarnock, the writer Alistair Boyd, who has now found himself at the centre of a lawsuit by developers demanding 22 million euros in damages after investors pulled out of the project following the campaign.

Lord Kilmarnock, who is the step-father of Martin Amis, is one of three expats being sued by the consortium behind the double golf course scheme that includes the construction of 800 houses and three luxury hotels on the outskirts of the Sierra de las Nieves national park, near Ronda.

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Lord Kilmarnock was one of more than 100 foreign residents who signed a petition against the 100 million euro scheme. But it was his comments made to the Spanish media criticising the project on environmental grounds that have landed him in hot water.

The 79 year old, who has written several successful books about Spain, was quoted last August as saying: "The scheme is completely unsustainable. The high demand for scarce water in a period of increasing drought will inevitably degrade the environment.

"The plague of buildings on green and protected land is threatening the long term interest of the region, which has become popular for green tourism," he said.

Two others expats, Briton David Milnes and German Petra Wiegink, also publicly spoke out against the venture and now stand accused by the developers of a litany of crimes including slander, coercion and moral injury.

But they argue that they felt morally obliged to defend the environment in which they live and were only exercising their right to free speech.

"I felt compelled to speak out against the project because of the obvious environmental impact and got together with fellow ex-pats to show that we were not all interested in building golf courses," explained Mrs Wiegink, 49, who has lived in the area for four years.

"Now we are in the ridiculous position of having to defend ourselves against this enormous claim for damages," she said.

"It has come as a horrible shock but we are determined to fight the developers and hope that justice will prevail."

They have the support of Spain's Green Party.

In reference to the Los Merinos project, Francisco Garrido of the Green Party called on the Spanish parliament to launch an investigation.

A friend of Lord Kilmarnock said yesterday that the peer was not in good health and was extremely worried about the case, which was already costing a lot in legal fees. "It is particularly scandalous given how much he has done for the area over the last half century," said the friend, who asked not to be named.

"He is a real friend of Ronda and his books have brought an incalculable number of tourists here as a result. Is this a fair way to treat an old man for giving his point of view?"