

More calls for SANDF funding rethink and withdrawal from the DRC

Guy Martin - 29th January 2025



SANDF troops in action against M23 rebels in the DRC.

The chorus of calls for South Africa to properly resource its military and withdraw its troops from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continue after 13 SA National Defence Force (SANDF) soldiers were killed there over the last week.

The Federation of Unions of South Africa (Fedusa) on Wednesday said it “echoes concerns raised about the preparedness of the SANDF, particularly considering reports suggesting lack of necessary

resources for this peacekeeping mission. These concerns include years of budget cuts impacting training, equipment and maintenance.”

On Tuesday, the Public Servants Association (PSA) said it was “shocked about reports indicating that South African soldiers who were sent to this peacekeeping mission lacked necessities required for armed forces. The PSA is disturbed by this tragic incident and calls on government to assess all other missions where soldiers are sent.”



The PSA said Minister of Defence and Military Veterans Angie Motshekga visited the DRC last week to assess the operational conditions and welfare of SANDF personnel deployed in the region but flew back in a military jet, leaving the deceased and wounded soldiers in Goma.

Budget cuts eroding SANDF



The South African casualties come after repeated concerns by civil organisations, unions, and political organisations about the preparedness of the SANDF after years of throttled budgets, which resulted in cutbacks in training, failure to modernise equipment, reduced serviceability of equipment, including main battle equipment, and the withdrawal of air support. The SANDF experienced budget cuts of some R9 billion over the last five years.

The PSA called upon the Minister of Defence and Military Veterans to assess all missions where soldiers are deployed to ensure the adequacy of the resources and their safety.

“Soldiers cannot be deployed without a proper analysis of the ability to respond equally to the demands of that mission. Where necessary, soldiers must be withdrawn as South Africa cannot afford to be everyone’s hero to the detriment of the country. The Ministry must put measures in place to prevent a recurrence of this kind of painful and embarrassing scenery for the country. The PSA hopes that the death of these soldiers will not be in vain and will be a wake-up call to government to reassess its attitude towards the capacitation of the public service.”

The image of SANDF is currently in tatters with soldiers trending on social media waving the white flag, the PSA said, calling on government to restore the honour and integrity of the SANDF to its former glory.

DRC deaths ‘shake the nation’

The United Democratic Movement (UDM) Deputy President and Leader in Parliament, Nqabayomzi Kwankwa, said the recent events in the DRC “have deeply shaken our nation, raising critical questions about South Africa’s continued military participation in peacekeeping missions – especially when such sacrifices are the result.”

While the UDM acknowledged South Africa’s responsibility as a global player to uphold its commitments to United Nations peacekeeping missions, it said “we cannot allow our servicemen and women to be sent into conflict zones ill-prepared—like lambs to the slaughter! Moreover, the events of the past few days should be seen as an embarrassment for the SANDF and a stark reflection of South Africa’s diminishing military capabilities. How can we justify our continued participation in peacekeeping missions when we struggle to meet the very military standards these missions demand?”

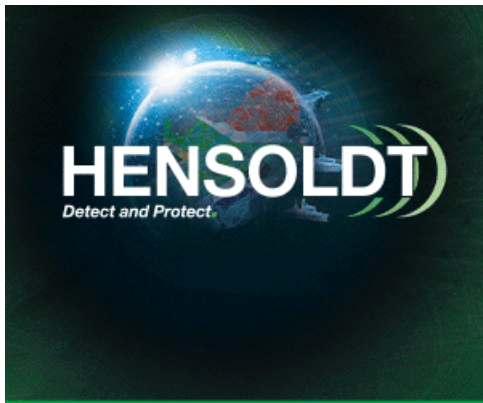
For years, the SANDF and the Ministry of Defence have sounded the alarm on its chronic underfunding, yet these warnings have been largely ignored, Kwankwa said. The Defence Force Service Commission had highlighted the need to strengthen our armed forces, not only through better equipment but also with adequate training. Most recently, the Ministry of Defence in the Government of National Unity emphasised the pressing need for an increased defence budget.

The SANDF has been subjected to severe budget cuts and the ravages of underfunding and unserviceable capabilities against escalating tasks have had a devastating effect into the Force. For instance, in the 2023/24 financial year, the Department received a total budget allocation of R51.1 billion, a net decrease of about R500 million from the previous adjusted budget. However, the 2024/25 defence budget is set at R51.8 billion, and subsequently adjusted to R52.4 billion. For 2025/26, the defence budget rises to R53.7 billion and for 2026/27 it increases to R56.2 billion, but considering inflation is over 5%, this represents a decline in real terms, and subsequently, is a disaster for the SANDF and its abilities to carry out its primary mandate, not to even mention peacekeeping missions, the UDM stated.



“For example, the SANDF cannot defend our skies, as only two of 26 Gripens are operational and none of its none of its C-130BZ Hercules are airworthy. Our country’s maritime defence capacity is also shocking, as the Navy only has one frigate and a lone multi-mission inshore patrol vessels to patrol our seas, with none of its submarines functional. Denel is also failing dismally to develop tools and advance the SANDF. For instance, Denel received and was paid R8.3 billion for a contract signed in 2007 to deliver 264 Badger armoured personnel carriers over the following ten years. It has been almost twenty years since signing that ten-year contract. To date, none of these have reached our troops. Not one.

“Defence spending is now at about .7% of GDP versus the international norm of 2% of GDP, putting strain on an overstretched SANDF that is carrying out deployments in the DRC, Mozambique, internally and on South Africa’s borders. As it stands, the SANDF is unable to pay for critical spares, maintenance and upgrades, resulting to the external deployments being in serious trouble.



“The challenges facing the SANDF are not new. However, the UDM believes that the recent events in the DRC highlight the urgent need for the Government of National Unity to reprioritise defence spending—or rather, address the chronic neglect of our armed forces.

“Until our troops receive proper training, sufficient and fully operational equipment, and the necessary tools to perform their ordinary duties effectively, the UDM strongly urges that South Africa drastically scales back its participation in UN peacekeeping missions and bring our soldiers home,” the party concluded.

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