

**Opening Remarks by Hon NN Mapisa-Nqakula, South Africa's Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, on the occasion of the briefing to the Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Defence, 4 April 2013, Cape Town**

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Chairperson and Honourable Members,

We want to thank the joint Chairpersons for agreeing to grant an earliest opportunity for a briefing on the matters relating to the recent loss of lives of some of our service men deployed in the Central African Republic and the circumstances surrounding the work they have done there.

Having said that, let me also acknowledge the unique nature of this briefing and the special circumstances that have made us to meet here so urgently. The tragedy of the loss of 13 lives, the biggest in the post Apartheid SANDF, has had certain quarters of our society asking questions that Government should respond to. Not only have there been questions, but, somehow unfortunately, disturbing insinuations were made to suggest that there was something sinister in the work that our soldiers were doing in the CAR.

As I have already indicated, the loss of life of 13 of our soldiers is the highest number since the dawn of our democracy. It is a sad event that has touched the emotions of all our people. For this reason, the overwhelming reaction of shock and concern is not unusual, nor is it unwelcome on the part of government.

Let me assure all our people that, for us as a democratic government, it is absolutely essential that every South African, should be allowed the space

to demand accountability; and that government should provide answers that ensure such accountability.

We have however been concerned that, in the wake of the death of our soldiers in battle, all of us should take extra precaution, that we do not throw unsubstantiated rumours that may be insensitive to our loss and instigate events that may jeopardize the security of many of our soldiers that are still deployed outside our borders.

I thought I should clarify this point that informs our commitment to accountable governance in general and specifically, our participation in today's discussions. I will, at a later stage, return to these matters about the need for caution in matters relating to troops deployment and its impact on the safety of our soldiers and the effectiveness of our Defence mandate in general.

Chairpersons, I am aware that Parliament, being a platform for political engagements, allows for contestation of views about the correctness of policy and governance choices. For this reason, I am certain that we will not leave here today without such a contestation and debate, including it's the usual posturing associated with such an exercise. However, before we do that, let me enumerate a few matters of absolute fact:

1. It is a matter of fact that the Central African Republic is a landlocked country at the heart of the Great Lakes region of our Continent
2. It is also a matter of fact that, like many of its neighbours, the CAR has suffered decades of instability due to internal conflicts that has resulted in the violent struggles for power, in which its ordinary inhabitants have been the defenceless victims.

3. Another fact is that since 2003, when the democratic government of the CAR was ousted by Francois Bozize with the collaboration of the UFDR rebels,
4. This resulted in the Bushwar by those who opposed Bozize, leading to the referendum for a new Constitution and the holding of elections in 2005.
5. The election results of 2005 were not accepted by all participants, and further and renewed rebel activities ensued. This prompted the African Union to take a direct interest in resolving the ongoing decline of stability in that country
6. AU interventions included various high level missions that reported to the Peace and Security Council,
7. Another fact is that at its meeting on 7 December 2006, the Peace and Security Council examined the reports of its Missions to the CAR and adopted Decisions amongst others demanding that the CAR rebel movements renounce violence and pursue peaceful dialogue to find solutions to the problems in the country.
8. The **AU Peace and Security Council decisions** also directed that member states, "***in the name of African Solidarity***" should provide support for the socio-economic recovery and the consolidation of peace and stability in the CAR. Measures proposed included among others "Assistance towards the Defence and Security Sector."
9. In 2007 the Government of Francois Bozize, in line with the guidance of the AU, signed a new peace deal with the UFDR rebels providing

for their recognition as a political party, and the integration of its soldiers in the country's army, FACA.

### **South Africa's involvement in post conflict recovery of the Central African Republic**

Chairpersons and Hon Members, In February 2007, the South African government signed the Defence Cooperation MOU with the CAR (Operation Vimbezela). This followed the AU decision of the December 2006 to which I have referred.

The aim of this Operation was for South Africa to assist in capacity building in the CAR army (FACA). The military training included the Protection Force, VIP Protection, training of group leaders, specialists and infantry, refurbishment of bases and barracks and the provision of equipment (camping equipment, training ammunition, uniforms and vehicles).

As I indicated, during the same year the AU ensured that a peace deal is signed between UFDR rebels and Bozize providing for the integration of their soldiers into the FACA. This process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), was also led by South Africa as part of Defense Cooperation. Given its own experience of reintegration here at home and the success of similar work in Burundi, the SANDF was best placed to assist the CAR in this regard.

Further negotiations between the UFDR and Bozize led to another agreement for reconciliation in 2008, leading to the 2010 elections and the formation of the Unity Government, still led by Bozize.

For the AU and South Africa, these developments created conducive conditions for the post conflict recovery of the CAR. Most importantly these developments would also help sustain the very fragile stability of the Great Lakes region, particularly in the neighbouring DRC.

Chairpersons, outlined above is the complete and full extent of the basis for signing the cooperation agreement and going into the CAR. South Africa and the CAR renewed the Cooperation agreement in December 2012.

### **The Security situation in the CAR since January 2013**

When the security situation in the CAR deteriorated earlier this year, the government made an assessment that resulted in the deployment of 200 additional troops in the CAR as a protection force for the trainers and the military assets that were already in that country. This was very important because a contingent of unarmed SANDF trainers and South African government assets were in the CAR. It was also important to ensure that South African military assets in the CAR do not fall into the wrong hands.

Hon Chairpersons and members, it is important to emphasise that these additional soldiers, were not trainers and therefore not deployed to train but as a protection force for our personnel and equipment. I am aware of reports in our media purporting that when our soldiers were interviewed, many of them indicated that they had not conducted any training of the CAR army since their deployment earlier this year. Training was not the mandate of the protection force, but that of the smaller group they were deployed to protect.

We had also taken a decision to continue monitoring the situation in order to inform further action, if necessary, to protect our personnel and our assets.

Talks to resolve the crisis in the Central African Republic we organized by leaders of that region and they began on 9 January 2013 in Libreville, Gabon, with representatives of the government, the rebels and political opposition parties.

On 11 January 2013, Central African Republic President Francois Bozize and the rebels who sought to overthrow him reached a deal to create a coalition government with the country's political opposition. This agreement would allow Bozize to stay in office until 2016 with the provision that a prime minister will be appointed from the country's political opposition. Elections for the legislature would also be organized in a year.

President Francois Bozize signed a decree removing the country's Prime Minister, one of the steps called for in the peace deal. Opposition lawyer Nicolas Tiangaye was on Thursday 17 January 2013, officially appointed Prime Minister of the Central African Republic's new National Unity Government.

Following this agreement, the South African troops had remained, having relocated our personnel and equipment to a new base at the police training college. Training and capacity building work also resumed.

At the same time, the UN representative to the CAR, Madame Margaret Vogt, called for South Africa, and other foreign troops not to withdraw from the CAR as she feared that the CAR situation was fragile and may develop into a Mali situation.

It is important, in this regard, to appreciate that, prior to the recent conflict, the CAR was a fragile state slowly recovering from decades of instability and *coup de tats*.

#### South Africa and the recent conflict

The Seleka rebels breached the cease-fire agreement and marched into the capital Bangui, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2013. In the process they attacked the South African base on the way to the palace resulting in a fierce battle when the SANDF defended its base. Fighting bravely and outnumbered our soldiers managed to fend off the attack and inflicted huge casualties on the rebels forcing them to surrender.

13 of our soldiers lost their lives in battle and about 27 were injured.

Our soldiers fought bravely and with pride in the face of an overwhelming enemy attack.

We must emphasise that, despite having being forced to defend themselves after being attacked, our soldiers we never deployed to CAR to wage battle. They had gone to the CAR to assist with the post conflict recovery of that country, knowing that through their work, the people of that country will know peace and stability. Their efforts would ensure that fellow

human beings, including future generations of African children, will live in conditions of peace, no longer victims of conflicts of greed for power.

They deserve our honour, gratitude and respect.

Thank you.