

SA, look after your soldiers



ALL ACTION. Soldiers at the ready after being dropped off by a helicopter during a military demonstration at the Roodewal Bombing Range in Limpopo. Pictures: Jacques Nelis

Roy Andersen

South Africa depends on its part-time soldiers; at any one time, they make up 40% of the soldiers deployed to safeguard our borders, – and occasionally this figure goes up to 70%.

We have 23 000 reservists on the books, all of them volunteers. Last year, we called up 15 000 of them for an average of 169 days each – we couldn't afford to call up more, even though the reserves are the most cost-effective branch of the Defence Force. The reason we couldn't is because of the extremely tough budget cuts the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) had to endure the past few years.

It's almost impossible to cut the salary bill of the regular force members, so it's always the part-timers who face the brunt.

We're soldiering on, we've stabilised the budget over the last three years, but it's still 30% down on where it was. This has a direct effect on the amount of troops we can call up – not all of whom are deployed as part of Operation Corona, the border protection initiative.

The Navy and the Air Force call up mechanical and electrical engineers, while the Army has a corps of specialists ranging from lawyers to accountants – and even town planners. The Military Health Service has specialists in its reserves.

Not all of our reservists work in combat roles, either. Many work extensively in the rural areas, some build bridges, others help

the big read

local farmers to grow crops which are then sold back to nearby military bases to feed the troops.

All these reservists are affected by the budget cuts.

Our biggest challenge, sadly, is that the vast majority of the reservists are not employed in their civilian lives and depend on their SANDF to make a living.

When they don't get a call-up, or the call-up is shorter than they expected, this leads to a sense of demotivation and – in some cases – real anger.

What adds to this resentment is that all of them have received exactly the same training as the regular force – it's only at the conclusion of the two-year military skills development system (MSDS) that some are streamed for further contracts in the regular force and others find themselves assigned to the part-time force.

A lot of youngsters are saying that the SANDF hasn't been fair to them, that the Defence Force owes them a job. There have been allegations of corruption, of unscrupulous officers and senior NCOs selling call-ups to desperate part-time soldiers, or even issuing fictitious call-ups to pocket



the money themselves. The Chief of the Army, Lieutenant-General Lindile Yam, established a board of inquiry to investigate these allegations last August and the release of this report is imminent.

This kind of behaviour or any other form of corruption – and the negative commentary on social media platforms by members of the Reserve Force – will not be tolerated. There are mechanisms to deal with this within the Defence Force and these must be used.

The reality, though, is that the Reserve Force is set up to complement the Regular Force, not to offer full-time employment.

There are 20 SANDF reserve force soldiers who will still be charged for their intention to picket January's court case into allegations of corruption within the call-up system. I have immense sympathy with their

plight, but they must face the full consequences of their actions – because they are soldiers and soldiers aren't allowed to behave the way they did.

We are often asked why, if the budgets are being cut, the two-year MSDS still runs. The answer is simple: the defence force has to keep rejuvenating itself. One of the solutions will be to start streaming basic training very shortly so that members who come into the force know immediately whether they are being streamed for a Regular Force appointment or being trained to go into the Reserve Force, which will hopefully manage the expectations slightly better.

The board of inquiry will also investigate the allegations of corruption and if these are found to be based on facts, those involved will face the full force of not just

the Military Disciplinary Code, but South Africa's criminal law too, because the SANDF cannot afford to harbour individuals with this mentality in its ranks – be they regulars or reserves.

For me, though, the saddest part is that so many of our Reserve Force members do not have full-time careers in civilian life.

All the soldiers who come out of the MSDS programme are trained, they are disciplined, they are loyal and they have proved they can learn new skills. They would be an asset to any company in this country.

My appeal is to industry and business in SA is to think about this when they look to employ new staff. Prioritise the hiring of military veterans, who have already volunteered two years of their lives – and in some cases much more – to this nation.

My other appeal is to government: we dare not cut the defence budget any further. This is not an emotional appeal, but the cold hard fact that the Reserve Force plays a cost-effective, critical role in protecting this country.

Our soldiers are the ones on the borders making sure people sleep safely in their beds at home at night.

Our soldiers are the ones stopping the smuggling of contraband, stopping the child trafficking, stopping cars stolen in the cities being driven into neighbouring countries.

We forget that at our cost.

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