

Budget debate of votes 23 and 26 - Deputy-minister T Makwetla speech 18th May 2021.

Hon Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, Min Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula
Hon Members of Parliament's Defense and Military Veterans Oversight Committees,
Colleagues, Distinguished leaders of our Military establishment and the Defence Community at large,
Hon Members of the House,

Our budget debate this year comes after 14 months of an unprecedented curtailment of many activities in our normal life, and the introduction of a range of new practices we never imagined could be part of our lives before, to ensure that life continues. Performance in many spheres of human endeavour has been subdued as we learn new ways of doing things. The same applies to the programs of both our Department of Defence and the Department of military Veterans over the period under review.

Honourable members, we now know better that the threat to human life will not always emanate from outright war and conflicts. The huge threat which remains hanging over human life as a result of the Corona virus, tells us that we may have entered an era where pandemics are likely to become part of our lives into the future. This has a direct bearing on how the security of citizens and the forte of militaries are perceived and organised for globally today.

Our budget debate takes place against an important changing of the guard in the command of our Defence Force. This marks in part a significant signpost because it notably marks the bowing out of the last leadership team, from the legendary June 16 detachment of Umkhonto we Sizwe. This by implication is the team which served the longest time in boots and uniform, for almost four decades and a half. I therefore wish to join the honourable minister, minister Mapisa-Nqakula in giving a royal salute to the outgoing Chief-of-the-SANDF Gen Shoke, and his team, Lt Gen Zimpande Msimang, Lt Gen Jeremiah Nyembe, and Lt Gen Zola Dabula for their patriotism and the dedication with which they served our country.

Similarly, I wish to join the minister again in congratulating the team which is about to resume duties under the able command of the New Chief-of-the-SANDF, Gen Rudzani Ru Maphanywa, which includes Lt Gen Mbatha, Lt Gen Wiseman Mbambo, Lt Gen Ntshabeni Maphaha, Lt Gen Sipiwe Sangweni and Lt Gen Thalita Mxakato. We wish them well, and we wish them all the wisdom in their new crucial responsibilities.

House chair and honourable members, to move on, allow me to remind the house that our debate today straddles two votes, namely vote 23 (the DOD budget) and vote 26 (the DMV budget). For the first time the budget of DMV is now a separate vote with the responsibility to account for its own budget through its own accounting and budget systems. This concludes the bureaucratic process of establishing a stand alone department for military veterans, which commenced a decade ago.

In the beginning and in the recent past, military veterans have called for a separate ministry for military veterans because their perception is that things are not happening for them or their interests suffer neglect because of the absence of a separate ministry dedicated to military veterans. In view of the successful creation of a separate vote for DMV, it may assist in future for parliament to consider separating the debates of these two votes, so as to allow sufficient attention and time for the ventilation of the business of the DMV. This arrangement does exist in some of the ministries which oversees two departments, however it is for parliament to explore the logistics of such an arrangement.

Honourable members, the DMV continues to register steady progress in delivering on its mandate. However, its achievements remain modest because the project to establish the DMV stalled midway. The DMV budget allocations plateaued before a full Department could be realised. As a result the Department only exists nationally. It lacks any meaningful infrastructure in the provinces which deprives military veterans access to its services.

In addition to this objective constraint, the internal environment is characterised by several debilitating subjective weaknesses. The skills base of the department is inadequate, and consequence management is not strong enough. The planning capacity of the department has improved but still remains below what the department requires. There are still policy gaps which are dealt with through ad hoc measures, and benefits whose delivery modalities are still to be designed. These challenges account for the widespread dissatisfaction among military veterans.

Honourable members as the saying goes, “to every crisis there is a silver lining”. The depth of dissatisfaction among military veterans escalated. Overtime, petitions from military veterans to the President started growing. This led to a request by the President for an urgent meeting with the Ministry of Defence and military veterans over grievances of military veterans. House chair, this political intervention was a major relieve and a shot in the arm to the mandate and mission of DMV, because it brought the needed executive weight to resolve some of the obstacles which constrained support for military veterans.

The President appreciated the need for extraordinary measures to bring instant relief to the needs of military veterans. This intervention rested on three pillars. Firstly, there was agreement that as a matter of urgency the provinces should be robbed in to facilitate immediate accessibility of services to military veterans through provincial line-function departments, including metro and district councils were applicable. Secondly, that all National departments whose mandates addresses some of the needs of military veterans be brought into the agenda of the Task Team. Thirdly, that the military pension which is provided for in the DMV legislated policy, be introduced as a matter of agency. And that the R350, SRD Covid-19 grant be paid out to all destitute military veterans with immediate effect.

This is the task which the Hon Deputy-President, David Mabuza has been assigned to spearhead, supported by the Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, Minister Mapisa-Nqakula, the Deputy-Minister of Defence and military veterans and the minister in the Presidency, the late Jackson Mthembu, who was subsequently replaced by Minister Khumbudzo Ntshaveni.

To realise the above mission since November 2020, the task team has met with all existing military veterans' associations of both former statutory and non-statutory forces. All the grievances were processed and negotiated, barring the demand by one group of military veterans for a once off payment of R2 million per person, for their participation in the struggle. This demand was considered virtually impossible and set aside.

The Task Team has proceeded to establish work-streams around each of the grievances raised by military veterans. Each work-stream is composed by officials from the relevant line function Departments, DMV, and Provincial sister departments reps. These teams have terms of reference and milestones for their work.

These work streams are as follows:-

1. Verification and cleansing of the database

A new team has been reconstituted by the minister to resume the verification of 5,000 plus applicants whose files are at the DMV. The process is observed by all representatives of interested associations. The panel has already had several verification sessions. It is an opportunity for bonafide military veterans who are not on the database to come forward to be verified and integrate. We should emphasise that this is the last endeavour to get bonafide military veterans who are not on the database to be included. Following this work the military veterans database will be officially and finally sealed. The process to verify dependents will follow suite.

Honourable members we must underline that the building of a credible database of genuine military veterans stands between the success or failure of DMV. If the DMV fails to secure a list of credible recipients of the benefits we are providing, the department will lose credibility and respect in the eyes of the broader public and will become an object of resentment and derision. We call on all genuine military veterans and members of the public to come forward and assist DMV in exposing fraudsters and corrupt individuals during this exercise. It is about time for ethics and resentment for corruption to trend in our society. Let them not pass!

1. Legislative review

The process of amending the current Military Veterans' Act is in progress. Support has been sourced from the DOD, the Justice and Constitutional Development Department and National Treasury. Consultation with other government departments is taking place alongside engagements with military veterans' associations. The scheduled presentation by the department to the portfolio committee, should be followed by a presentation of the actual preliminary objects of the Bill.

1. Restructuring of the DMV

DMV supported by DPSA, DOD and National Treasury are collaborating over this intervention. They have refined and confirmed the new service delivery model of DMV. They hope to be done by end of June to submit to DPSA for the ratification of their product.

1. Military Pension

There is consultation with National Treasury and its agency GEPF, Department of Social Development and its agency SASSA aimed at finalising the draft policy. A workshop was held to test the efficacy of the proposed draft policy.

More than 900 military veterans received a sum of R1200 monthly, over the last 9 months as their SRD grant. This was possible because DMV provided a complementary amount of R850. An additional 614 applicants have been processed.

1. Social services

With respect to social services the principle is to craft protocols which will govern the collaboration between the DMV and provincial line function departments. This includes among others, an arrangement which obviates the need for the transfer of top up budgets in the delivery of houses for military veterans. The easy flow of information from DMV to Provinces to provide bonafide recipients of houses, health and education

1. Presidential pardon

The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has furnished the office of the President with files of individuals who have applied for Presidential Pardon dating back two administrations before. Those involved in the November march are called upon to submit their particulars as well.

1. Heritage and memorialisation

This work stream is collaborating with the Department of arts and culture. Among its key project is the concretisation of plans for the return of humans remains of those who lie buried in distant lands across the globe.

A significant policy shift has been agreed upon by the Task Team to do away with the means test on access to benefits by military veterans who were members of the liberation armies against apartheid and therefore not gainful employed or remunerated for their service. This should provide relief to many military veterans who were still struggling as a result of the exclusionary regulations which applied before. This decision will be part of the amendments to the act.

Hon chair of the house and honourable members, in the interest of time allow me to skip the details of the plans before us, in order to reflect briefly on some of the seminal challenges of the DMV architecture.

Honourable members, the DMV is to a large measure also hamstrung by the complications which flow from the unrefined or politically controversial formulations contained in the Act. This is more amplified by the topical definition of who constitute a military veteran. This definition has led to a contestation over who the policies of the department were intended for. This equally speaks to the mandate of the DMV. Whichever way we answer these questions, it is clear that the letter and spirit of the genesis of the policy did not envisage a catch all type of solution. Secondly, it is legitimate for government to look after ex-soldiers. Thirdly, government has an obligation to assist former members of self-defence units. Lastly, veterans of the struggle who bore the brunt of apartheid repression are not only those who were in boots and uniform, especially because ours was 'a people's war.'

Hon House Chair, we must reiterate that the priorities of our government over the past 27 years were absolutely correct. The ravages of Covid and the economic destruction revisited on our economy over the past year have further emphasised the enormous socio-economic rescue plan we must execute. All the above notwithstanding, we are committing an error of unimaginable proportions in the destruction we are causing to South Africa's military establishment. What is happening is simply apolitical. The living conditions of our soldiers is a sheer crisis, it is scandalous and should not be allowed to continue. We cannot have correctional centres which afford societal offenders better living conditions than citizens who are serving their country with honour.

The Reserve Force Component of our defence force is a strategic enabler. It must be managed properly and professionally in keeping with the One Force Concept of our military design. Over the past year of Covid-19, 14,800 members of the Reserves were called up and acquitted themselves well in their various roles and duties. As the Chief of the Defence Reserves, Gen Andersen said, "we must now prepare the SANDF Reserves for the future"

The recently appointed Chief of the S.A. Army, Lt Gen Mbatha, had this to say, "I had the privilege of visiting, on my appointment as Chief Army all the 67 Army Reserve Units. The visit provided an opportunity to acquaint myself with the state of units on the ground and to get a feel of the morale and welfare of the men and women of our part-time force. Whilst I was impressed with their high morale and innovative spirit, I was moved by the challenging conditions under which many of our Reserve soldiers serve." This observation is not different from I have been exposed.

In the absence of additional resources, there is only one solution and one solution only to consolidate the meagre 0.8 % of the GDP we still have available for the defence functions. The deployment of our defense forces has to come under review as a matter of urgency guided by our bottom national interests.