



**MINISTRY OF DEFENCE AND MILITARY VETERANS**  
Republic of South Africa

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**MEDIA ADVISORY**

**DATE:** 21 February 2017

**EMBARGO:** Immediate

**SUBJECT: ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA AND COMMANDER – IN - CHIEF OF THE ARMED FORCES, HIS EXCELLENCY PRESIDENT JACOB ZUMA, ON THE OCCASION OF ARMED FORCES DAY**

The Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, Madame Mapisa-Nqakula  
Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Mr Willies Mchunu,  
Ministers, Deputy Ministers, MECs present  
Mayor of the eThekweni Municipality, Councillor Zandile Gumede and all mayors and  
councillors present,  
The Chief of the South African National Defence Force  
Generals, Admirals, Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers,  
Members on Parade  
Military Veterans of the World War 2 present here today  
Descendants of the patriots who died in the SS Mendi,  
Fellow South Africans,

I greet you all on this important occasion, our country's Armed Forces Day.

Let me begin by extending our deepest condolences to the families of the three naval officers and three staff members of the Department of Public Works who lost their lives tragically late last week at the Durban naval base.

We received the news with great shock and sadness, occurring just as preparations were at an advanced stage to celebrate Armed Forces Day.

We are with the families at this difficult time. Their loss is our loss.

Compatriots,

Today we celebrate the fifth Armed Forces Day. Five years ago we decided to use the 21<sup>st</sup> of February each year as Armed Forces Day to celebrate the contribution of the people's defence force to the consolidation of democracy and peace in our country.

We chose the date of the sinking of the SS Mendi, so that the day on which so many paid the supreme price for peace should be used to honour our men and women who are prepared to lay down their lives if need be, to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic, and its people, our soldiers.

This Armed Forces Day has a special meaning in our country, because we are marking the centenary of the sinking of the SS Mendi troopship.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1917, the SS Mendi ship was chartered by the British Government as a troop carrier to serve in World War 1, carrying eight hundred and twenty three members of the fifth battalion.

They had completed 34 days of the voyage from Cape Town to England, and were now on their way to France to the war, when the tragedy struck in the English channel. The SS Mendi was struck and almost cut into half by a much bigger ship, the SS Darro, which was bound for Argentina.

Six hundred and sixteen South Africans died in the disaster, mostly black South Africans. Black people had volunteered to join the First World War in order to fight against fascism. They were ahead of their time. They were internationalists who loved peace and justice.

They also joined the war believing that their contribution would lead to better treatment back home after the war by the colonial masters.

Unfortunately their sacrifice did not earn them any respect from the rulers of the time. They were not allowed to carry weapons and were to be utilised as labourers rather than as fighting soldiers. They were also never decorated or awarded any medals at the end of the war.

That is the painful history we come from, a history of brutal and blatant racism and colonialism.

The sinking of the Mendi is the tragedy second only in scale to the tragedy at Deville Wood in France the year before in 1916, when seven hundred and seventy six men of the South African Battalion died holding the wood over six day.

We travelled to France last year to pay tribute to those who fell in Deville Wood and to ensure that black soldiers are honoured and recognised in the South African monument to the war in that country, on an equal footing with the white soldiers. The new monument in France honours all our soldiers, black and white.

Together today, we restore the dignity and humanity of the black soldiers who perished on that fateful day. We salute their courage, bravery and commitment. We salute their quest for a more equal, and just world, for the better world we are still working to achieve one hundred years later.

We also salute the men of the Mendi because they promoted unity of the South African people.

We remember the timeless words of Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha who said;  
*“Be quiet and calm, my countrymen. What is happening now is what you came to do...you are going to die, but that is what you came to do. Brothers, we are drilling the death drill. “I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers...Swazis, Pondos, Basotho...so let us die like brothers.*

*“We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war-cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais in the kraal, our voices are left with our bodies”.*

In recognition of the tragedy, amongst the National Orders, the highest honours to be bestowed by South Africa, is the Order of Mendi for Bravery.

Through his Award we will continue to honour these men and their sacrifices throughout our lives and from generation to generation.

Compatriots and friends,

In memory of the selfless and brave soldiers of the Mendi, today we salute the men and women of the South African National Defence Force.

We take the Armed Forces Day parade and celebration to a different province each year. The ceremony was held in Atteridgeville, Tshwane in 2013, Bloemfontein in 2014, Potchefstroom in 2015, Port Elizabeth in 2016 and Durban in 2017.

On this important day, as Commander-in-Chief, let me inform the thousands of our soldiers, on behalf of the entire South African population, that your work is highly appreciated.

We thank you for answering the call to serve. We have full confidence in you.

Armed Forces Day is an important feature of our national calendar. It provides an opportunity to promote better understanding of the SANDF and its role in the consolidation and defence of our democracy and our people.

Our soldiers get out of the barracks and showcase to the people they are serving and protecting, the capability of the Defence Force and its state-of-the-art equipment. We trust that all our people are now assured that the SANDF is combat ready!

Many have enjoyed watching the various displays around EThekweni.

The people have been able to see what the various components of the SANDF do, from the navy, to the air force, army and military health services and even our colourful ceremonial guard and our talented musical choirs and bands in the defence force.

Armed Forces Day also provides an opportunity for our youth to learn about careers in the defence force. Through the Military Skills Development System, the SANDF has continued to recruit healthy and fit young people to join the South African National Defence Force.

They can be artisans, doctors, nurses, engineers and whatever they want to be within the Armed Forces. Over the past three years the SANDF has recruited over eleven thousand young people into the ranks of the defence force.

Importantly, the SANDF also supports other government departments in their community development work.

The SANDF has trained six thousand students who are part of the National Rural Youth Service Corps on behalf of the Rural Development and Land Reform.

The leadership development programme is designed to expose youth in rural areas to discipline, community development, leadership and critical life skills training.

A similar programme with the Department of Social Development has also been supported by the SANDF through training.

The SANDF, in partnership with the Province of the North West has launched a youth agriculture pilot project in the areas where the Defence Force has its foot print.

This is but one example of community upliftment projects that our armed forces are involved in.

On this important day we also acknowledge the contribution of the SANDF when there are disasters, be it floods or fires such as the fires that engulfed the Western Cape Province over a long period.

As we speak, the South African National Defence Force has been involved in Disaster Management in the wake of Cyclone Dineo.

An Oryx Helicopter is on standby at Air Forces Base Hoedspruit to cover both Mpumalanga and Limpopo Provinces with some operational members deployed at the Provincial Joints Centre in Mpumalanga.

The situation is being closely monitored and immediate reaction is appreciated in the case of Disaster Management activities.

When it comes to their core business, our soldiers continue to work tirelessly to defend the borders of the republic.

The SANDF continues to support and roll-out the “Maritime Security Strategy” along the Eastern Seaboard, in the Mozambican channel in order to counter piracy.

The presence of our troops along the border also helps to curb crime. Members of the SANDF recover illegal weapons, stop illegal migrant crossings and have recovered stolen vehicles, stock and contraband goods and dagga amongst others.

The SANDF also plays a key role in our foreign policy, anchored on the promotion of peace and security in the continent in order to create conducive conditions for economic development.

The African Union has taken a decision that we must silence the guns in Africa by the year 2020.

South Africa plays its role in the fulfilment of this goal. We have deployed more than three thousand members of the SANDF in the interest of contributing to peace and stability. We acknowledge the hard work of our troops in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Together with our friends and allies they are standing under the United Nations - Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) against armed rebels in the eastern DRC.

In other parts of the DRC – where tensions continue to simmer, they are responding to ensure that peace is maintained so that people and citizens of that country can live in a safe and secure environment.

We will continue with our involvement in our mediation efforts, peacekeeping operations, and peace-making initiatives in Lesotho, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Mozambique, South Sudan, Somalia and Libya.

We have lost soldiers in some of the peacekeeping missions in the DRC, Central African Republic or the Sudan.

We will always remember their selfless contribution to the quest for peace in our continent.

Compatriots

Every single member of the defence force is an integral part of our nation. As a nation, we salute you all.

We also salute the men who lost their lives when the SS Mendi sank. May we continue drawing inspiration from their selfless commitment and sacrifice.

Let me thank all who have contributed to the excellent arrangements of Armed Forces Day and SS Mendi commemoration.

We thank the South African Army in particular which is leading the celebrations this year.

May we all continue to work hard and tirelessly, to build a united, peaceful, secure and prosperous South Africa.

Happy Armed Forces Day to you all!  
I thank you.

**ENDS.**

Issued by: The Presidency

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