Minister of Defence and Military Veterans’ address at the keel laying of the first South African Navy Multi-Mission inshore patrol vessel 23 February 2019 at Damen Shipyards Cape

Chief of the South African National Defence Force, General Solly Shoke

Chiefs of Services and Divisions present, in particular Chief South African Navy, Vice Admiral Mosiwa Hlongwane

Flag and General Officers, Senior Officials of the Department of Defence

Non Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers

Chairperson of Damen South Africa - Mr Sam Mbotsi

Acting CEO Armscor: Advocate Solomzi Mbada

Executives in the Defence Industry

Ladies and Gentlemen

We are yet at another of those occasions where we are celebrating the achievement of a milestone and the beginning of even greater things to happen to our country and its defence establishment. A few years ago our South African Navy registered the requirement for the acquisition the Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Vessels (MMIPV) as the one the need for such has grown to patrol our shores effectively and with quick reaction.

Like he hydrographic vessel this requirement comes against the background of the major defence acquisition through the strategic defence package at the dawn of our democracy – mainly focused at the time on re-equipping the South African Navy and the South African Air Force respectively. This new Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Vessels (MMIPVs) will cater for the roles and obsolescence of Navy vessels such as the Strike Craft, Mine Countermeasures Vessels and the Torpedo Recovery Vessel that have been in service for more than 40 years.
The 1996 White Paper, which still remains relevant to this day, almost 25 years later, recognized the changed strategic environment and for the newly established armed forces to operate in a democracy, that there had to be major adaptations in terms of force design, force structure and the posture that the armed forces would assume.

But for all these to be realized, there needed to be a defence force with the appropriate equipment and operating in a changed regional, continental and global security environment, generally at peace with her neighbours but at the same time having a deterrence capability. The Defence Review that then followed in 1998 on the tails of the White Paper recognized the need to equip the armed forces once and for all, with the primary focus on the navy and the air force as alluded earlier. Thus began the process to acquire frigates and submarines for the fledgling South African National Defence Force’s maritime programme.

Even with the acquisition of these ships, the first of which were delivered in the early 2000s, there still remained other equally important requirements, which required capabilities that had been waning already at the time, and now having the different role - protection of the people instead of being at war with them, as well as being a critical instrument of foreign policy and defence diplomacy.

Having completed the Navy part of the strategic defence packages later, the need for the Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Capability for the South African Navy. vessel capability was identified and thus Project Biro was born and duly registered, with the process undertaken to seek a suitable company that would deliver on this project, preferably through an indigenous South African capability, comprising the Damen South Africa.
Following a lengthy process of acquisition, Damen was chosen as the entity that would build the vessel for the South African Navy. This is a very important achievement and confidence in South African knowledge, expertise and innovation that exists within the South African Defence Industry, SADI. It is very important to note that Damen was able to accede to our request to build these vessels here in South Africa instead of opting to build them somewhere as an international company with outlets around the globe.

This programme will create the necessary job opportunities needed and make a very important contribution to the country’s Operation Phakisa, which has been identified as a Presidential lead project to focus on ensuring the full utilization of our oceans endowment and littoral state that we are not leaving out the exclusive economic zone, EEZ, which stretches further into the southernmost part of our country and the African continent.

Today’s ceremony, is one akin to “cutting the ribbon”, marking the beginning of a major project. It comes on the heels of yet another milestone that we have achieved. 4 months ago, we were witness to the steel cutting ceremony for the Hydrographic vessel in Durban.

A keel laying ceremony is an important tradition for any shipyard. It is naval tradition that every ship constructed for service be honoured on four historical ceremonial occasions, being:

(1) the keel laying;
(2) the christening (or launching);
(3) the commissioning; and,
(4) decommissioning.
Today’s ceremony, the keel laying, marks the commencement of construction of the first of SAN Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Vessels (MMIPV). The keel laying ceremony is still an important part of ship construction, even though most ships today are constructed using a modular construction that does not include a traditional keel, as it is the case with the SAN MMIPV. Traditionally, the ceremony is meant to invite good luck in the construction process of the ship and continued good luck throughout the life of the vessel. As always, at the forefront of our minds are the naval men and women who will serve on the vessel in years to come.

As you have witnessed, a commemorative coin has been placed into the area of the keel as an offering of good fortune for the vessel. The requirement of capability that will be fulfilled through Project BIRO was evaluated for validity and considered for prioritisation by the operational staff council. The approval to proceed with the procurement processes came in August 2007. It has now been twelve years and finally we are witnessing the fruit of all the hard work that has been put in to arrive here, yet the road ahead is still long. The construction of the first of class to which we are witnessing the birth of today, will be completed in 2021 and is expected to start serving the people of South Africa from June the same year.

The second and third platforms are expected to be in service in the years 2022 and 2023 respectively.

These vessels will be an indispensable tool and part to realise our national goals as South Africa is essentially a maritime nation. The vessels delivered by Project BIRO will be work horses of the SAN reducing the load off the navy’s
existing fleet of frigates. The frigates are fatigued as a result of continuous patrol duties which they were neither designed, nor purchased for.

Operation Copper has been a particularly important deployment – patrolling the Mozambique channel in partnership with Mozambique and Tanzania to deter pirates who may pose a threat to Southern African ports and waters. South Africa’s four frigates – three aged OPVs (former strike craft), the SAS Drakensberg, Africa’s logistical supply vessel and SAS Protea, South Africa’s Hydrographic vessel – all participated in Copper.

While prevalence of piracy has somewhat declined, the extent of maritime crime observed – including trafficking, illegal fishing and smuggling – has been on the increase indicating that the maritime domain lacks law enforcement. The new vessels would be well suited to this task. This would allow the frigates to re-enter their planned maintenance cycles, without losing the navy’s crucial presence at sea. These new MMIPV’s will be of great benefit to the SA Navy, as the authors of the Defence Review admit ‘the SA Navy’s vessels can no longer be made combat-ready to execute the full range of missions they were designed for.

Particular it is the primary war-fighting capabilities that have been severely affected. Project Biro’s expanded capacity would then enable South Africa to mount cheaper, more focused and more effective missions and operations against the above-mentioned threats and challenges it encounters in its maritime domain, especially illegal fishing and trafficking. This improved capacity will be of immediate and immense national benefit. Of particular interest will be the possible impact on maritime security in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the rest of Africa and beyond.
The MMIPVs would patrol South Africa’s coast and territorial waters for criminal activities. Whereas these MMIPVs are not dedicated war-fighting vessels, they can be outfitted with weaponry if necessary.

South Africa needs Project Biro to better police its huge maritime domain, which is 1,553,000 square kilometres in size and often labelled its ‘10th province’. Claiming sovereignty over such a large area also gives South Africa substantial international duties and obligations, as recognized and envisioned in the Defence Review. These include search and rescue, hydrography, disaster response and assistance, peace support operations and naval diplomacy.

Participating in maritime regimes such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the Safety of Life at Sea and Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation requires substantial maritime, especially naval, capacity. It is of great importance that cognizance is taken of prominence that has been given to the need for local construction which has been especially welcomed.

This nodal requirement for local production is also in line with the national and African priorities detailed in the government’s maritime development plan known as Operation Phakisa. This further complements the vision contained in Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS 2050) of an African Blue Economy. A crucial part of this will be the elevation of African shipbuilding and maintenance capacity.

South Africa could provide useful lessons and expertise to the rest of Africa. The overall African maritime security could also be improved with increased joint African operations and patrols. South African-located shipbuilding companies have therefore been given platform to showcase their abilities and an opportunity to expand business to offer alternative deals, demonstrating to
SADC member states and beyond that patrol and law-enforcement needs can be met, perhaps through Biro-style partnerships with South Africa for constructing their own OPVs and/or IPV’s. In this way, Biro could lead onto the creation of the African maritime ownership and agency called for in AIMS 2050 and as envisioned in the phrase ‘African solutions for African problems’.

South Africa’s trade through the seas accounts for 95% of the country’s imports and exports. The waters off South Africa contain one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, with more than thirty thousand (30 000) vessels passing through our coast every year, carrying three hundred (300) million tonnes of cargo and at least 1,2 million tonnes of liquid fuel. Of these, thirteen thousand (13 000) dock at our South African ports. In addition, more than one hundred and fifty thousand passengers (150 000) travelled by ships to and from South Africa, including transiting, to and from South African ports on some of the most luxurious and biggest cruise ships afloat.

Going beyond our shores it is also important to mention that maritime security and the development of Africa’s blue economy are vital to sustainable development. Our exclusive economic zone (EEZ) has been described as the tenth province and potentially the richest, bordered by ocean in three sides including Prince Edward and Marion Islands respectively, with a coastline of almost four thousand (3924) and EEZ of more than one million five hundred thousand square kilometres.

As we undertake this keel ceremony today, we must also be happy, but not complacent, that as South Africa we are playing our role in these developments, and are in fact an integral part ensuring the safety and security of our seas, most importantly we are signatories to a number of international conventions governing conduct at sea.
The building of these vessels will thus cement a very important element in that this will enhance our capabilities of patrolling the ocean.

The defence and security of our oceans is inextricably linked to that of the region and the continent. We need to have a balanced maritime capability to effectively respond to rising maritime security threats affecting our shores, the EEZ and the region as a whole.

We are committed to deter any maritime illegal activities along the Southern Africa Coast on the Indian Ocean, in particular the Mozambique Channel and have consolidated our efforts towards establishing a regional strategy towards eradicating the maritime crime in the Southern African coast of the Indian Ocean.

The work and product that the MMIPVs does in simple terms, makes it possible for our seas to be patrolled and secured, not only for us but for all who traverse our shores! As we are conducting the keel ceremony for the building of these MMIPV, we need to be cognisant that this is the main tool to enable us to ensure that the maritime traffic and the coast or island is defended. That there is quick reaction or response for maritime rescue and that there is also no maritime boundary that cannot be defended and the laws can be enforced.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need not look at this project as only benefitting South Africa. In fact, it benefits the region, contributing to safety at sea in the Southern Africa region and includes large parts of the south Atlantic Ocean stretching from just below the Equator to Antarctica and from twenty degrees west to eighty degrees east into the southern part of the Indian Ocean. It is very important to mention that this area is where South Africa is responsible for ensuring that we provide a secure route for our vessels and other international commercial vessels that traverse through these seas routes.
Maritime resources that our country, region and continent are endowed with are facing a threat of poaching by many a seafarer with no good intentions and whose goals are to plunder our marine resources. In this regard we need to remain vigilant, and it is no mean feat that our South African Navy has been playing a critical role in the protection of our territorial integrity and sovereignty...mindful that the oceans, specifically the Atlantic and Indian oceans respectively, occupy a massive body of water which, if properly explored, would yield immense benefits for our country as part of the oceans economy.

I need to mention this against the background that it is done with the meagre and ever declining budget not only for the maritime defence programme of the South African National Defence Force, but the entire defence establishment. With a meagre budget, the South African Navy cannot be able to operate optimally and meet its target for planned hours at sea, their core business. As we undertake this programme to build these patrol vessel, we can only take comfort in the fact that the budget for it will come from a different pocket, the capital budget over a multi-year period and in the outer years of defence spending under the Special Defence Account, SDA.

That said, this event we are about today promises a new dawn in the turnaround of our industrial development, in particular, defence industrial development. This is because it showcases the Ocean Economy in action; advancement of black industrialists in action; the creation of thousands of jobs over the entire construction period the project is expected to be undertaken. It will incorporate state of the art Communication Intercept System and A Passive Close-In Surveillance System amongst the many other technologies to allow it to delivery on its responsibilities.
Ladies and gentlemen, the building of these is long and intensive but I have no doubt that they will succeed. Many of our people do not know that even when we acquired the strategic defence packages, specifically the frigates and submarines, many of the components found in those ships were actually developed, built and fitted in South Africa by South African firms.

In a similar way with the building of the patrol vessels we are demonstrating that we are truly an industrial powerhouse and most importantly, highlighting that the South African Defence Industry has the requisite capabilities and capacity, and that government spending has a positive impact on the socio-economic positive spin off on our society at large. We dare not fail, and need to ensure that our projects, small, medium and large, have positive spin offs for our economy and contribute to the gross domestic product.

Of importance is that the project is a significant catalyst for the Shipyard to improve local infrastructure and investment in human resources. This will serve and enhance local shipbuilding and support in the years to come. It is estimated that more than 300 direct jobs and more than 1000 indirect jobs will be created for a period of five years, not considering possible follow-on orders from other customers.

It is my wish that on the consideration of jobs in the main project and the sub-contractors, military veterans or their dependents must also be factored in. This especially after the Defence Charter has already been very recently signed by the Minister of Trade and Industry and will create opportunities for military veterans’ companies.

In conclusion, I look forward to the commissioning of this ship once completed after the project phase.
I thank you!