

Address of the President of South Africa and Commander-in-Chief of the SANDF, Thabo Mbeki, on the occasion of the Presidential Fleet Review

Simonstown, 5 September 2008

"Presidential Order of the Day - we wish you and the South African Navy every success in ensuring the maritime security of our nation and helping to underwrite and guarantee the liberty, the sovereignty, the pride and dignity of our people."

Minister and Deputy Minister of Defence,
Ministers present here,
Premiers of the various Provinces,
Mayors of Cape Town and Simonstown and Senior Officials of Government,
Chief of the South African National Defence Force,
Chief of the South African Navy,
Chiefs of the Services and Divisions,
Flag Officers,
Members of the South African Navy,
Your Excellencies, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am privileged to officiate at this Presidential Fleet Review and thank especially the South African Navy for the excellent manner in which it has organised this occasion.

Together with all present here today, I am saddened that this Fleet Review is taking place after the untimely death of the Secretary for Defence, Mr January Masilela, whom we laid to rest hardly a week ago.

All of us are saddened because death has taken away one of the bright stars in our Defence architecture, a committed civil servant who made an invaluable contribution to our national defence system.

This morning we witnessed our Fleet at sea... a Fleet which comprises some of the very best technology in the world, and whose crews are some of the finest among South Africa's young men and women.

As I reflected on this magnificent spectacle, I recalled that our presence here today, on the occasion of this Fleet Review, represents the culmination of a long journey.

This journey has derived its inspiration from a vision forged by our nation as a whole, reinforced by the dedication, sacrifices and efforts of the South African National Defence Force, as well as those who preceded it.

It is a journey that has sought to arrive at the point where we would have created a new South African society founded on the principles and practice of human equality, human rights, human dignity, and human solidarity.

We are happy that the Navy women and men, who are present here, and all their comrades, as well as their colleagues in the rest of the National Defence Force, are inspired by a vision of a society in which liberty and lives of dignity would be enjoyed and celebrated by all.

Our Constitution, the fundamental law of the Republic, enjoins us to establish a "defence force (that is) structured and managed as a disciplined military force. (It says) The primary object of the defence force is

to defend and protect the Republic, its territorial integrity and its people in accordance with the Constitution and the principles of international law regulating the use of force."

The same Constitution prescribes that one of the principles governing the national security of the Republic, in which the National Defence Force plays a central role, must be that such "National security must reflect the resolve of South Africans, as individuals and as a nation, to live as equals, to live in peace and harmony, to be free from fear and want and to seek a better life."

The fleet of the South African Navy we reviewed today, as well as the other disciplined military Services that constitute the National Defence Force, have been and are being rebuilt in response to, and according to these Constitutional requirements.

In addition to what we have said, our Constitution says more about the kind of South Africa whose independence the National Defence Force is obliged to protect. This is a South Africa characterised by freedom, justice and equality, respect for the rule of law, prosperity, safety and security for all, and a machinery of state that serves the interests of all our people, as prescribed by the Constitution and the laws approved by our democratically elected legislatures.

Accordingly, the members of the South African Navy, singly and collectively, like the members of the rest of the South African National Defence Force, must at all times remain absolutely loyal to the imperative to defend the law and the Constitution, serving as the professional force required by our Constitution.

This means that all of us who constitute the national defence system, from the Commander-in-Chief, through the Ministers and the Officers Commanding, down to the officers and privates in the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, Defence Intelligence, the Medical Services and Joint Operations must, at all times, act strictly according to the Constitution and the law.

This also means that if anyone among us thus defined, acts in a manner contrary to this fundamental requirement, which would constitute a betrayal of the sacrifices made by our people to give birth to the Constitution and the laws which define our democracy, should expect that the law will and must take its course.

In this regard, all of us who constitute our country's national defence system must always remember that our Constitution makes the unequivocal determination that "the Defence Force is the only lawful military force in the Republic".

This immensely privileged position, of being the only institution of state legally authorised to carry weapons of war, carries with it the grave responsibility that we must conduct ourselves in a manner that assures our democracy and all our people that the deadly armoury we hold in trust, and thus the extraordinary power of which we dispose, will at all times be used solely and exclusively for the purposes defined specifically by our Constitution and our laws.

Should there be any member of the National Defence Force, and I hope there is none, who holds a position that is at variance with the Constitution and the law, her or she is free to leave the SANDF, and promote whatever they believe, as a private citizen outside the ranks of the disciplined military forces, guaranteed by our Constitution the rights to freedom of thought and expression.

Speaking about itself, our Navy correctly says:

- The geo-strategic position of the Republic of South Africa (it) occupies as a country, is (a) primary factor, and is followed in importance by its maritime zones, marine resources, marine ecology and conservation... as well as its maritime trade. All of these factors carry with them immediate national, regional and international obligations.

The inextricable link between maritime security and economic prosperity was recognised even upon the conception of our new dispensation. On the occasion of the International Fleet Review which took place in Cape Town on April 5, 1997, the esteemed first President of our Democratic Republic, Nelson Mandela, remarked as follows:

- Just as we believe that all people should be free, so too, as a Nation we believe in the freedom of the seas. That is a matter of national strategic interest. We are a maritime nation trading all over the world. We accept our obligation to combine with
-
- other maritime nations to uphold the freedom of the seas and to protect our national interests through naval power. We also undertake to manage the resources of our huge Exclusive Economic Zone wisely for the benefit of the people of the Region.
-

The period since Nelson Mandela, Esteemed Member of the Order of Mapungubwe, made this statement, has seen the transformation of our Navy and the rest of our Armed Forces, an important change initiative which has sought to address every aspect of our military establishment. Included therein has been the central challenge of human resource transformation.

Our vision has been that the composition of our Armed Forces should represent the demographics of our nation, convinced that this is fundamental to the building of a credible and capable Defence Force. The remarkable strides that have been made towards attaining this goal are indeed very encouraging.

A further and important dimension of the transformation process has been the implementation of the programme to re-equip the National Defence Force.

This process has seen the South African Navy make the transition from a poorly equipped Force, comprised largely of ageing and obsolete vessels, to a first class Fleet, which is endowed with cutting edge technology, and staffed by world-class officers and highly trained and competent young men and women.

Today we have a South African Navy that has the capacity to accomplish the full range of maritime strategic objectives and missions that are consistent with the domestic and international tasks which democratic South Africa has set itself.

Now the South African Navy has a new fleet. The characteristics of the platforms at its disposal, such as their size, their sea-going ability, their extended range and endurance mean that all the areas of the South African Exclusive Economic Zone are placed within its patrol range, and its regional reach extends to the maritime regions of the Southern African Development Community as a whole, and beyond.

Fully consistent with our defence doctrine, the extended capability of our Fleet will ensure that the South African Navy is able to make a meaningful contribution to furthering the foreign policy of our government and people, centred on peace, security and the sovereignty of all states, and helping to realise the African Agenda in our region and continent.

In this regard, we are determined to contribute to the strengthening of the Maritime Component of the SADC Brigade (SADCBRIG). The launch of the SADC Brigade on 17 August 2007 in Lusaka, Zambia, was an important milestone and a step towards constituting a regional force capable of responding to the challenges of ensuring peace, security and stability in our region and Continent.

The importance of effective maritime capability within this regional force cannot be over-estimated. For a number of reasons, maritime and naval power has become increasingly important, both in the region and on the continent.

Factors influencing this include our dependence upon seaborne trade, the importance of our offshore energy resources, and the fact that much of the world's trade and cargo moves along our coast. A further emergent feature is the escalation in piracy, the poaching of marine resources, as well as the hope entertained by other sister African countries that we would assist them to respond to these common threats.

In this regard, it is pleasing to note the many achievements of our National Defence Force in furthering our African Agenda in support of continental peace and stability.

The presence of the SANDF has been appreciated in countries such as Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Comoros and Sudan, where it has supported peace processes aimed at permanent stability, national unity and reconciliation, democracy and development.

We are proud too, of the many notable successes achieved by the South African Navy, both in its activities in the region, under the auspices of the Standing Maritime Committee of the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee, and within our own waters.

I have no doubt that many South Africans remember with sincere appreciation the role of the SAS DRAKENSBURG of the South African Navy, which transported the 200-ton rotor for the Koeberg Nuclear Power Plant from Antwerp in 2006.

The Drakensberg changed course while sailing on the high seas to carry out a military mission, to accomplish an emergency civilian task focused on advancing the goal of a better life for all our people.

As it docked at Cape Town harbour, the ship sported a hand-painted banner which read, "Going the extra mile to light up your lives", which the rotor did by restoring electric power to Cape Town and the rest of the Western Cape. I am proud to confirm that the South African Navy and the sailors of the SAS Drakensberg did indeed, at very short notice and without hesitation, go the extra mile to serve the people of South Africa.

I am also certain that, unfortunately, many among us will have forgotten that in 1997, the now decommissioned SAS OUTENIQUA of the South African Navy, docked in Pointe Noire in the Republic of Congo.

For many days it remained at this Central African port to host the first and only direct political negotiations between the late Mobutu Sese Seko and Laurent Kabila, chaired by Nelson Mandela, which initiated the protracted political process democratic South Africa facilitated, that led to the reestablishment of peace, national unity and democratic government in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Once again, on this occasion, eleven years ago, the South African Navy discharged its responsibilities with great distinction and loyalty to the national cause.

This I must now communicate as part of the

- Order of the Day
- - to our Minister of Defence, Mosiuoa Lekota, Deputy Minister Mluleki George, the Chief of the National Defence Force, General Ngwenya, the Chief of the Navy, Vice-Admiral Mudimu, and the men and women of the National Defence Force who serve our Nation with dedication and commitment - we wish you and the South African Navy every success in ensuring the maritime security of our nation and helping to underwrite and guarantee the liberty, the sovereignty, the pride and dignity of our people.

We say this always mindful of the example set by such patriots as the late Defence Minister, Joe Modise, and the late Secretary for Defence, January Masilela, who would have been equally pleased with what we have seen today.

May our People's Navy go from strength to strength, and relying on the new and modern fighting ships it has been given by the new, democratic South Africa, as well as the professionalism, creativity and dedication of our Officers, sailors and marines, play its due role in the reconstruction and development of our country and the Renaissance of Africa.

As a public person and member of the ruling party, I am born of a movement whose fundamental value system has always been based on the imperative always to serve the people of South Africa, with no expectation for personal gain or acclaim, always ready to make the necessary sacrifices in this regard.

During the difficult years of our struggle for liberation, I was honoured to be admitted into the ranks of the Luthuli Detachment of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

I know the value system that informed this honoured Freedom Detachment, which dictated that all of us must engage in struggle until freedom is won, always inspired by the objective that nothing we do should dishonour the cause of the people's struggle and the dignity of the masses of our people.

I say all this not out of choice, but because it cannot be avoided. I say it because as your Commander-in-Chief and President of the Republic, I want to assure you that the new ships you sail and the aircraft you fly, given to you by our democratic order, were obtained without resort to corrupt means, informed only by the outcome of the widely-consultative Defence Review which decided the needs of our National Defence Force, including the South African Navy.

Members of the South African Navy, and members of the National Defence Force, please rest assured that whatever mischievous story or rumour any among our people and others abroad may choose to propagate, the modern and sophisticated equipment you now control and operate was obtained honestly, based on decisions of our national Government, and informed only by the Defence Review and the imperative to build a National Defence Force that would discharge the responsibilities prescribed by our Constitution.

As Commander-in-Chief of the South African Navy and the South African National Defence Force, I am privileged to commend our new Fleet to the Nation, as well as convey to all the officers, men and women who sail its ships on guard for peace, and operate their weapons of war, the best wishes of the People of South Africa.

Long live the South African Navy!

Long live the South African National Defence Force!

Thank you.