

Aircraft parts for Zimbabwe justified - SANDF

The SA National Defence Force (SANDF) has defended the disposal of military helicopter airframes and spares to Zimbabwe amid threats of legal action to stop the move.



Image: SA Transport

The *Mail&Guardian* newspaper *M&G* reported on Friday (25 January) that fears had surfaced that retired military helicopters from the SANDF would be used to prop up President Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF.

However, SANDF corporate communication director Brig-Gen Xolani Mabanga said the decision to donate and dispose of Alouette III helicopter airframes and spares to the Zimbabwean Defence Force (ZDF) was made by former defence minister Joe Modise in 1997, when they were being phased out of service.

"How the donation of the spares to the ZDF relate to the forthcoming elections in that country is difficult to understand," Mabanga said.

All processes for the disposal had been completed and the spares were ready for dispatch to Zimbabwe as a donation.

"There is no truth in that the donation of this material has taken place. Furthermore there is no truth of the SANDF donating helicopters as alleged in the news reports [on Friday 25 January]).

"The SANDF would like to place it on record that it has a bilateral agreement with the ZDF, and a number of exchanges in various fields between the two defence forces have taken place and will continue," he said.

The *M&G* reported that the SANDF was "about to send a gift of helicopters and spares to its Zimbabwean counterparts, raising the spectre they will be used in a military-backed campaign to put Mugabe and his Zanu-PF party back in power in polls expected this year".

"The *Mail & Guardian* has seen the confidential minutes of a meeting in Cape Town two months ago between defence chiefs of the two countries.

"Under the heading 'disposal of Alouette III helicopters and spares', the minutes noted that 'the administrative processes in the SANDF have been finalised and the equipment will soon be handed over to the ZDF'."

Zimbabwe was scheduled to hold elections by the end of March, but they were widely expected to be delayed for some months, the newspaper reported.

"Apprehension is building in civil society and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that the military will step in, as it did during the violent 2008 presidential run-off to save Mugabe."

The aged, but versatile Alouette III, which had been operated by the military in both countries since the 1960s, would be a force multiplier for the ZDF, providing fast access to rural areas.

According to the *M&G*, Zimbabwe was under European and United States weapons sanctions, hampering its air force's efforts to keep its handful of Alouette III and Agusta-Bell light utility helicopters in the air.

In a statement issued in response to the report, civil rights group AfriForum said it would take urgent legal action to prevent the "imminent delivery of Alouette III SANDF Air Force helicopters" to the ZDF.

AfriForum's legal representative Willie Spies said it would use all legal avenues at its disposal to prevent the dispatch and delivery of the aircraft to Zimbabwe.

"We are also writing to the French ambassador to South Africa, to inform him about a potential risk of his country being in contravention of the European Union arms embargo against Zimbabwe, as a result of the South African government's disposal of French imported spare parts to Zimbabwe," he said.

In terms of the National Conventional Arms Control Act, the National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NCACC), chaired by Justice Minister Jeff Radebe, had to consider certain principles before a transaction for the disposal of military equipment to another country was authorised.

These principles included, among others, the human rights-record of the country in question, Spies said.

The *M&G* reported that Radebe's spokesman Mthunzi Mhaga said the Alouettes and spares did not "fall within the NCACC's parameters of control" under its enabling legislation.

The NCACC was apparently relying on the classification of the helicopters as "civilian" after their guns were stripped out, though both the giver and the recipient were military.

Source: *Sapa* via I-Net Bridge