



Urban Deployment Reveals South African Military Deficiencies

OE Watch Commentary: There was great hope that the deployment of South African soldiers to gang-infested areas of Cape Town would result in a significant reduction of violence. However, as the accompanying excerpted article from the South African website *The Conversation* notes, that hope is fading, and being replaced with the realization that not only is a quick fix to the longstanding violence improbable, but that the South African military, due to budget woes as well as problems with its force structure, is in a “sorry state.”

As the article notes, a very general rule of thumb is that military expenditures should be approximately 40% for personnel, 30% for operations, and the remaining 30% for capital expenditures. In South Africa this 40:30:30 ratio is skewed towards 80:5:15, making the military more like “a welfare [agency] rather than a warfare one.” Interestingly, while the high personnel cost translates into sufficient numbers of soldiers, it doesn’t translate into enough that are deployable. Adverse issues include retention of too many individuals unfit for duty, a large number of expensive general officers, and rank inflation.

The article discusses that there are presently 37,000 soldiers in the army, but less than half of these serve in infantry battalions. Peacekeeping operations are tying up one battalion. There are also 15 companies maintaining border security, which the article claims is a task more appropriate for 22 of them. The end result is that when it comes to performing their current responsibilities, the military is short approximately 8.5 infantry battalions.

This lack of spare infantry troops is apparently impacting the operation to quell the violence in Cape Town. While President Cyril Ramaphosa said there would be 1,320 soldiers assigned, less than 300 are actually on the streets at any one time and even these appear to be struggling to fulfill their mandate. As the article points out, this may be because the South Africa National Defense Force is structured and trained for its primary tasks, including defending its borders, not secondary ones such as assisting local police. (Also see: “South African Military Enters Cape Flats to Quell Violence,” *OE Watch*, September 2019). **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**



“While training does continue, tight budgets and force structure problems have impacted the capabilities of the South African military.”

Source: US Army Africa/Flickr, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shared_Accord_2013.jpg, CC BY 2.0

“Using the military continuously in internal secondary roles has stretched it beyond capacity and contributed to its downward spiral of decline.”

Source: Lindy Heineken, “Soldiers won’t stem gang violence because South Africa’s army is in a sorry state,” *The Conversation (South Africa)*, 15 August 2019. <https://theconversation.com/soldiers-wont-stem-gang-violence-because-south-africas-army-is-in-a-sorry-state-121754>

In terms of the defence budget the ideal expenditure ratio is 40 % personnel, 30% operations and 30% capital expenditure. Some claim this is closer to 80:5:15 in reality, leading to the defence force being labeled a welfare, rather than a warfare agency. ...

The result is that people in the affected areas are fast realising that the army is not the solution. This echoes previous cases where soldiers were deployed to crime hot-spots in the country but failed to have a measurable impact.

The consequence is an ageing force with average troop age of 38 years and the Reserve Force age of around 40 years. The average age of an infantry soldier should be around 23-25 years.

The other factor affecting the capacity of the military is its force design. The South African National Defence Force is structured, funded and trained for its primary, not secondary tasks. Using the military continuously in internal secondary roles has stretched it beyond capacity and contributed to its downward spiral of decline.

There is a clear “disconnect between the defence mandate, government expectation and resource allocation.” If the government is serious about providing security for its citizens, it is crucial to fix the structure and design of the force, which have eroded its capacity to function optimally.