

Troops return to CAR region

Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula confirmed last week that South Africa had deployed troops to countries neighbouring the Central African Republic to assist with the withdrawal of SANDF forces in the CAR. She was speaking to journalists at the Cape Town Press Club.



Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula
(Image: GCIS)

She said after South Africa suffered 13 fatalities in a rebel attack near Bangui in March, it sent soldiers to the region while it decided whether or not to evacuate the rest of the forces.

These soldiers had been part of a 400-strong contingent approved to go to the CAR but had many of them remained in South Africa and fewer than 300 were sent.

"After the attack in Banqui we are assessing the situation to determine whether we remain or evacuate the troops and while the assessment is done it's necessary to have forces nearby in the event that there is a need to evacuate them. With troops nearby that can then be done quickly."

The deployment of troops to Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the wake of the fatal Bangui attack sparked reports that South Africa was planning to pour more troops into the CAR for a counter-attack on rebel forces.

Mapisa-Nqakula said deploying troops to neighbouring states proved a sensible decision as it made for a "highly efficient" withdrawal from the CAR.

Increasing troop numbers

There have been reports in recent weeks that South Africa is likely to send SANDF members back to the CAR after its neighbours agreed to send 2,000 troops to the country to boost the regional peace-keeping force Fomac.

But Mapisa-Nqakula ruled this out unless it was part of a multilateral contingent. "South Africa will not go to Bangui on its own. That measure is not on the table," she said.

She said South Africa assumed that if the African Union decided that there was a need to send peace-keepers to the CAR, it would be asked to contribute ground troops.

"It is at that point that we will consider whether we deploy or not," she added.

Bangui marked South Africa's worst military losses since the end of apartheid and the mission was heavily criticised. But the minister reiterated fears that instability in central Africa could worsen and said South Africa had a duty to help restore calm to the region.

Asked about South Africa's decision to increase its presence in the eastern DRC by 1,000 troops, she said regrettably the Congolese military was not run in manner that enabled it to neutralise rebel forces and militia in the eastern DRC.

Troops not being paid

"Any government that does not look after its soldiers is likely to run into problems. You will see the kind of situation that we see now in the eastern DRC," she said.

She said political accords became meaningless if the soldiers meant to enforce them were not paid on a regular basis.

"If you don't have properly structured systems where your soldiers know [that at the] end of the month they can go to the bank and get a salary, you are going to run into problems," she said.

"It is very unfortunate to have to say this, but these are some of the things that we are trying to assist the DRC to do," she said.

South Africa could not stand by and watch the DRC being overrun by "criminal elements".

"We have a responsibility to assist, we have a responsibility to baby-sit them until [such] time [as] they have set up proper government structures in the same way we have done in our country," she said.

Source: Sapa via I-Net Bridge