

Top air base left in the dark

Public works incompetence also sees navy run dry

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SOUTH Africa's two key strategic military bases are battling either to flush the toilets or to keep the lights burning.

Makhado Air Force Base in Limpopo, home of the Gripen and Hawk squadrons, has run 11 large generators for the past four months to keep the lights on — at a monthly cost of R1-million for diesel alone.

Simon's Town Naval Base, home of the country's multibillion-rand arms deal frigates and submarines, has leaking pipes that have cost taxpayers an estimated R34-million over the past six years.

Both situations have been blamed on the embattled Department of Public Works, which has spent R206-million upgrading the president's private homestead and millions more on the official residences of cabinet members.

Sergeant Thomas Mulaudzi said public works had yet to repair infrastructure after a major power outage that affected operational and residential parts of Makhado.

"It has been a while now that the problem has been unsolved. We are still waiting for public works. The base is utilising generators and we are getting a lot of help from air force headquarters," he said.

Makhado, which opened in 1987 and is known as "the fortress of the north", houses the R10-billion Gripen fighter jets acquired in the arms deal.

Parliament's portfolio committee on defence was briefed on the crisis during a base inspection last week. The team learnt that:

- The power outage happened in early October last year when a

high-voltage electrical cable failed and about 230 houses on the base were left without electricity;

- It will cost an estimated R9-million to repair the fault; and

- Operating the back-up generators cost about R1.2-million a month in diesel, excluding spares and maintenance.

DA portfolio committee member David Maynier wants the committee to investigate why a strategic military facility is being compromised by public works.

A faulty pipe at SA's main naval base has spewed tap water — worth up to R15 600 a day — into the sea daily for six years

"The officer commanding Makhado Air Force Base, General Schalk van Heerden, has been almost heroic in trying to solve the electricity problem. However, after nearly four months, the absolutely useless department has not managed to repair the damage to the electrical system," he said.

A faulty pipe at South Africa's main naval base has spewed tap water — worth up to a staggering R15 600 a day — into the sea daily for six years.

The problem was so bad before the festive season that homes and B&Bs in Simon's Town were without water. The council resorted to cutting water supplies to the base.

The chairman of the South Peninsula subcouncil, Felicity

Purchase, estimates that R34.2-million worth of water has been lost owing to a leaking 100m pipe at the base since 2006. This is based on council water readings.

"Public works paid the huge bill over the years, full well knowing that there is a problem. So they would rather pay the bill with tax money than address the underlying problem," she said.

Matters came to a head on December 6.

"I got a call from a navy admiral one morning. He was upset as he couldn't flush his toilet or take a shower. He scheduled a meeting between us and public works that day," said Purchase.

Navy spokesman Lieutenant Leverne Benjamin said aged valves caused the "unintended discharge of water over an extended period of time".

"Regrettably, the main sources of the leaks have not been found or repaired. The matter has frequently been brought to the attention of the Department [of Public Works]."

Efforts to curb the water loss include sometimes cutting water supplies to parts of the base. "Many man hours are lost on such occasions, as the SA Navy has had to send its entire east yard workforce home for health and hygiene reasons," she said.

Public works spokesman Thami Mchunu said the department had been "trying to secure funding for the permanent repair of the pipeline. In the interim, [we have] appointed a plumbing contractor to do repairs until the project to repair or replace the entire reticulation commences."

He said work had already started at Makhado, where "extensive damage" would take about three months to repair.