



Thieves strip military radio hub of copper wire

Navy goes 'deaf' and unable to communicate with fleet

BIANCA CAPAZORIO

WHILE the Waterkloof Air Force Base has dominated headlines after the Gupta wedding guests' jet landed there, another military installation is being stripped bare by copper thieves.

The Sunday Independent understands that Silvermine, the radio communications hub for the South African Navy, has been hit by copper thieves in two separate incidents in recent weeks. And the discovery of a dead civilian woman, floating in the swimming pool at Air Force Base Makhado in Limpopo, has raised questions about the level of security at South Africa's military bases.

Silvermine and Makhado are believed to be national key points, due to the military work conducted there. The government does not identify key points.

At Silvermine, hundreds of metres of copper wire, installed on May 2 at the lower antenna farm as a fix for a previously stolen part, was discovered stolen on May 7.

In a second incident at Silvermine, five people were caught by guards trying to steal copper wire at the base's top antenna farm.

These are the latest of several incidents of copper wire theft at Silvermine over the past 18 months, that have caused naval communications to "go deaf" from time to time.

Other incidents include:

- At least four cases reported last year, among them two incidents in February, 2012. In one incident, copper pipes from the base's air-conditioning cooling towers were stolen and, a few weeks later, thousands of metres of copper wire and other copper parts were stripped out of the lower antenna farm by thieves who had apparently entered the

base through holes in the fence.

- In January, copper thieves hit the upper antenna farm, effectively cutting the navy's communications systems to its fleet.

Commander Greyling van der Berg of the South African Navy would not confirm specific incidents of theft, but said there were currently "no disruptions affecting our ability to communicate with our ships and submarines".

"Theft remains an ongoing problem and the SA Navy has deployed elements of its Maritime Reaction Squadron to better protect equipment in outlying areas."

Van der Berg said this had "stemmed" incidents of theft, but had not completely "curbed" the problem.

Meanwhile, a woman's body was found in the swimming pool at Air Force Base Makhado on Tuesday. Spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Ronald Maseko said the matter had been handed over to the police and the military was "co-operating" with the investigation.

The DA's spokesman on defence, David Maynier, said: "The Naval Communication Centre at Silvermine is a strategic military facility and for that reason it is a national key point. It should be absolutely impenetrable to any unauthorised person, and yet it seems copper thieves breach the boundary fences regularly. The fact that the Naval Communication Centre at Silvermine is 'deaf' from time-to-time because of copper theft actually is a threat to national security."

Maynier said Minister of Defence and Military Veterans Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula needed to fix the problems at Silvermine.

"We cannot have a situation where the boundaries of strategic military facilities, which have been designated as national key points, are even more porous than South Africa's borders."