



President Zuma receives the SS Mendi special coin from Colonel Pat Ecutt. Zuma was officiating at the 5th Armed Forces day celebrations at Moses Mabhida Stadium in Durban to honour and acknowledge members of the South African National Defence force and commemorate the centenary of the Sinking of the SS Mendi Steamship.
PICTURE: ELMOD JIYANE/GCIS

JZ lauds Mendi dead on Forces Day

**NOSIPHO MNGOMA
AND GIVEN MAJOLA**

PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma has paid tribute to the six people who died in the Salisbury "freak accident" in Durban last week.

Three contract workers with the Public Works Department and three members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) died after inhaling methane gas at the Salisbury Island naval base.

Some of the SANDF workers were in Durban for the Armed Forces Day commemoration.

"We are with the families at this difficult time. Their loss is our loss," said Zuma.

Zuma, was speaking at the fifth annual Armed Forces Day event, which was held in Durban yesterday,

and sought to "celebrate the contribution of the people's defence force in the consolidation of democracy and peace in our country".

Present at the ceremony were military veterans of World War II and descendants of the more than 600 members of the South African Native Labour Contingent who perished on the SS Mendi.

This year, Armed Forces Day coincided with the centenary of the sinking of the SS Mendi.

"We chose the date of the sinking of the SS Mendi, so that the day on which so many paid the supreme price for peace should be used to honour our men and women who are prepared to lay down their lives if need be, to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the republic, and its people, our sol-

diers," said Zuma. The 616 mostly black men who died at sea in the ill-fated troopship were ahead of their time, said Zuma, as they had volunteered to fight against oppression.

"They were internationalists who loved peace and justice.

They also joined the war believing that their contribution would lead to better treatment back home after the war by the colonial masters."

Zuma said it was unfortunate that their sacrifice did not earn them any respect from the rulers of the time, adding that they were never decorated or awarded any medals at the end of the war.

"Together today, we restore the dignity and humanity of the black soldiers who perished on that fateful day. We salute their courage, bravery

and commitment. We salute their quest for a more equal, and just world, for the better world we are still working to achieve 100 years later."

In recognition of the tragedy, the country had also named one of the National Orders, the highest honours to be bestowed by South Africa, the Order of Mendi for Bravery.

"Through this award we will continue to honour these men and their sacrifices throughout our lives and from generation to generation," said Zuma.

It was in the memory of the men of the Mendi that Zuma saluted members of the SANDF yesterday.

He stood hand-on-heart as the navy, air force, army and military health services and ceremonial guard saluted him. See Page 10

Relatives of soldiers attend ceremony in UK

KEVIN RITCHIE

PORTSMOUTH: The words of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* rang out from the flight deck of the SAS Amatola yesterday, as South Africa and Britain remembered the centenary of the deaths of 616 South African soldiers in the country's worst maritime accident to date.

Led by Minister in the Presidency Jeff Radebe, wreaths were thrown by the 10 descendants off the starboard side of the South African Valour class frigate into the English Channel just off the Isle of Wight after Navy bugler, Chief Petty Officer Theo Joemath sounded the *Last Post*. Then, after a two-minute silence, *Reveille*.

Throughout the proceedings, the Royal Navy destroyer HMS Dragon circled around the wreck, after sailing with the Amatola early yesterday from Portsmouth.

Everyone was standing to attention for the playing of the national anthems, when the ship's sound system failed. The descendants, thronged by serving South African military personnel, broke the silence by spontaneously singing *Nkosi*, continuing even when the sound was restored.

Chief of the Navy, Vice-Admiral Mosiwa Hlongwane, opened the proceedings earlier by reciting the now legendary exhortation by the Reverend Isaac Hlongwane Dyobha to dance the death drill as the mor-

tally struck Mendi plunged below the surface.

"Exactly 100 years ago and in the same place today we commemorate these brave souls who gave their lives without a shot being fired or a bayonet being drawn. These men joined in a quest for adventure and a sense of volunteerism," Hlongwane said of the men of the South African Native Labour Corps who either went down on the Mendi or perished in the frigid winter water after the SS Darro rammed the troopship just before 5am on February 21, 1917.

The crew of the Amatola, were following in those very footsteps of adventure, all volunteers who had signed up to serve their country, he said, and if necessary to die.

It would have been fitting for the Amatola's sister ship, the eponymous SAS Mendi, to have been the designated ship, but she remains laid up in Simonstown undergoing a refit.

The Mendi had met HMS Nottingham in 2004 over its namesake's wreck to lay wreaths, but the SAS Amatola was a fitting replacement having officiated during the 90th anniversary of the sinking, said Hlongwane.

The frigate is named to remember a bitter war between the Xhosa nation and the British empire in 1852 in what is today the Eastern Cape.

"Many of the men on the Mendi were in fact from the same region," Hlongwane said.