

Armed Forces Day celebrated

NOSIPHO MNGOMA
AND GIVEN MAJOLA

PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma has paid tribute to the six public servants who died in the Salisbury Island "freak accident" last week.

Three Department of Public Works employees and three members of the SANDF died after inhaling methane gas at the Salisbury Island naval base in Durban.

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.

He was in Durban in his capacity as the commander in chief of the armed forces on this fifth annual event 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 could 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 soldiers," 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 join World War I in order to fight fascism.

"They were internation-

alists 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."

Unfortunately their sacrifice did not earn them any respect from the rulers of the time.

They were also never decorated or awarded any medals at the end of the war, he said.

"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 bravery and selflessness of the men of the Mendi that Zuma saluted the men and women of the SANDF yesterday.

He stood up hand on heart as the navy, air force, army, military health services and ceremonial guard saluted him in a spectacular parade down Masabalala Yengwa (NMR) Avenue outside Moses Mabhida Stadium.

Hundreds of onlookers braved the chilly rain to watch this parade before making their way down to the Blue Lagoon, where a demonstration of military combat was displayed on the sea, on the land and in the air.

Zuma's tribute to Mendi soldiers

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In memory of soldiers who died in worst SA naval disaster

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.

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 mortally 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, Hlongwane 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 Simon's Town 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. "Today we take the opportunity to thank the descendants of these men who gave their lives for a country that did not even regard them as citizens," singling out Dyobha's great-great-granddaughter, Natalia Sifuba, for a special mention.

Hlongwane also used the

opportunity to remember the navy's own disaster when the SAS President Kruger rammed into the SAS Tafelberg on February 18, 1982, taking 16 sailors to the bottom as she sank.

"It's our greatest tragedy to this day. We mourn these sailors who too left a legacy of courage in the face of insufferable odds.

"Unlike 1982, the men of the Mendi will never return to their native soil."

He also recalled the deaths of navy personnel in Durban last Friday, noting they had died going to the aid of others.

Navy Chaplain, Captain (Rev) Lulamile Ngesi quoted from Psalm 107, "The sailor's psalm" ... "those who go to the sea in ships... they have seen the works of God".

Africa, he said, prided itself on the men of the Mendi for "making men of African steel and African timber", resting spaciouly below.

"We thank Almighty God for all they were and all they still are. Their unfulfilled dream and hopes are ours now."



President Jacob Zuma unveils the Stone of Remembrance for the fallen soldiers of the SS Mendi troopship that sank in the English Channel during World War I.