

# MILITARY CHIEFS CRY FOUL OVER DODGY LEASE

## Relocation of defence nerve centre to ecopark raises concerns about national security and threats to civilians

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**N**ational security is under threat after the department of public works signed a questionable R115 million contract to relocate a sensitive military unit from its Thaba Tshwane headquarters in Pretoria to an office park in Centurion.

The relocation early this year of the Joint Operations division of the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) from the fortified Thaba Tshwane military complex to Eco Park in Centurion was against the advice of the military's own intelligence structure, Defence Intelligence (DI).

Three high-ranking military officials told City Press this week that DI opposed the move for security reasons.

Minutes of several meetings, held in 2014 and 2015, between the department of public works, the military and the owners of the office complex, show that DI did not attend a number of important meetings to discuss the move.

The minutes, which City Press has seen, also show that officials were not given the necessary critical information about security requirements of the office park before Joint Operations could move in.

The Joint Operations division, which consists of the army, military health services, the navy and the air force, is the nerve centre of the military - and the custodian of sensitive information about the country's security. It is also responsible for implementing military operations both within and outside South Africa,

including the UN's peacekeeping missions.

The relocation of Joint Operations from Thaba Tshwane follows a questionable R115 million five-year rental contract, signed in August 2014, between the public works department and the owners of the complex to accommodate the unit at Eco Park.

The owner of the office complex, whose name is known to City Press, has not been accused or implicated in any wrongdoing.

Public works department spokesperson Thami Mchunu and department of defence spokesperson, Siphwe Dlamini, did not respond to written questions sent to them by email on Thursday.

The military has been paying R1.9 million a month in rent since August 2014, but it only moved into the property in January - six months before the lease was due to expire.

A senior military official said: "DI did not okay the relocation of Joint Operations because of security concerns. The building in Eco Park is vulnerable to attacks from enemies. And if that were to happen, there will also be a heavy casualty of civilians.

"Eco Park is situated in a busy residential and business area, brimming with civilians. Joint Operations is a very sensitive organisation and runs the affairs of the entire military. They are responsible for implementing operations inside and outside the country. The work they do should not be exposed to security risks."

Another experienced military officer said: "If we consider what Joint Operations is all about, the relocation simply does not add up. Thaba Tshwane is a military complex that would not be accessible to would-

be attackers. It has fortified bunkers, where we would be able to run operations if the country came under attack. Blenny (Joint Operations' headquarters in Thaba Tshwane) is located far from civilians, in a secured and protected location."

The officer said he was also aware that DI - which gathers intelligence, handles vetting and provides surveillance and counter-surveillance for the military - did not grant clearance for the occupation of the Eco Park offices because of security concerns.

A third officer asked: "How do you explain the fact that the lease agreement was signed in 2014 and they are only moving in less than six months before the contract expires?"

Confidential SANDF documents, which City Press has seen, show that the relocation was not requested by the then-Joint Operations chief, Lieutenant General Derrick Mgwebi, as it should have been. The move also went ahead without any planning, the documents show.

The documents also indicate that communication about the move came from the departments of public works and defence.

"No planning was done [with regard to] this as the chief of Joint Operations did not request the move to Eco Park. There were no specific guidelines ... received from higher headquarters, except for documentation received from the departments of public works and defence," one document states.

According to a letter written to brief the military's logistics department about the relocation, the defence department indicated that the "chief of Joint Operations seeks immediate accommodation".

"But no reference of a letter is visible. No letter was generated by the chief of Joint Operations regarding this," the document states.

The document also shows another letter from the defence department, stating: "Your request [for relocation] was forwarded to the national department of public works."

But "no request for relocation was generated by the chief of Joint Operations", the document adds.