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Although they earn enormous salaries of nearly R2 million per year, the military's top generals do not pay a cent for water and electricity. South Africa's taxpayers pick up that tab.

For a mere R1 600 per month, the generals can live in luxurious houses in prestigious neighbourhoods such as Waterkloof. That, too, is paid by the taxpayers.

City Press' sister publication Rapport has learnt that some of the generals' water and electricity bills amount to more than R20 000 per month.

Moreover, the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) pays huge amounts to refurbish the generals' properties, which are guarded by soldiers, some of whom patrol the streets in front of them. Renovation and maintenance work is often handled by the army's own craftsmen, although the houses are rented through the department of public works.

When load shedding was still in effect, each general had a huge military generator at his home. These generators are part of the military's equipment to ensure that bases and offices have electricity at all times.

The publication is aware of at least one case where a military water tanker was parked at a general's house because there was a water problem.

The generals' royal treatment is increasingly viewed with resentment by the rest of the soldiers - especially since South Africa's forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo are currently suffering from a lack of equipment, proper accommodation and medical facilities. Within South Africa, many soldiers live in dilapidated and dangerous military houses.

Troops complain that the generals' empathy for the soldiers' plight decreases as the number of stars on their shoulders increases.

"Soldiers are growing more disillusioned because the generals don't care about the troops at ground level. There's no [concern] among the top management while the defence force is literally falling apart," says Advocate Pikkie Greeff, national secretary of the SA National Defence Union.

Greeff had to obtain an urgent high court order last month to restore the electricity at 4 SA Infantry Battalion in Middelburg, where the offices and residences had been without power for nearly two weeks.

"There's also a sewerage pipe on the base that's been clogged for a long time and the sewage is flowing down the streets. This creates an untenable situation for soldiers who have to work and live there, because it stinks to high heaven. When they complain about these disgusting conditions, they're simply snapped at that they should look for other work or a place to live if they can't cope where they are. There are army houses where the geysers don't work. The army's attitude is that the soldiers can fix them themselves. We're compiling a list of similar defects and then we're going to fight the case in court, based on the provisions of the occupational health legislation. Soldiers just want to do their jobs in acceptable conditions," says Greeff.

The decision that the military would pay the top generals' municipal bills was made by the defence force's command council in September 2018, according

LUXURY

life of top army generals

SANDF generals are living in affluent homes, at the taxpayer's expense – while the **lower ranks foot all their own bills**

to spokesperson Colonel Selinah Rawlins.

The late Sam Gulube, former secretary of defence and, as such, the army's chief accounting officer, approved the expenditure. General Solly Shoke was the defence force chief at that time. Prior to that, generals were themselves responsible for their municipal bills and had to pay exactly the same monthly rental as soldiers in the lowest ranks paid for a military house - R1 691.38 - whether it was in an upmarket neighbourhood or falling apart. Today, while the generals' rent and municipal bills are paid for them, the ordinary troops are still responsible for their own rent and bills.

The publication recently reported on the tragic deaths of Landie Africa-Coetzee and her young daughter in their army house in Postmasburg, due to a fire presumably sparked by an electrical fault. The house where she and her sergeant husband lived with their three children had been declared unsafe for human habitation more than a decade before and was supposed to have been demolished.

The official residence of army chief Lieutenant General Lawrence Mbatha was reportedly refurbished in 2020 at a cost of R1.7 million, shortly after he was appointed to that post. The renovations included a basketball and netball court, while one of his children received a room with a Superman theme - all at taxpayers' expense. The total bill included R80 000 for new curtains, as well as a new bathtub and tiles for one bathroom.

According to documentation seen by the publication, the money was recovered from the army headquarters' budget, although the accommodation technically falls under the department of public works. In the motivation for the installation of the netball and basketball nets - which cost R14 789 - it was indicated that they aligned with the army's "business plan".

Asked about the two nets and the Superman-themed room, Rawlins said renovations had been done at Mbatha's house due to structural damage caused by a

cracked underground pipe. She also claimed that the expenses cited by the publication were inaccurate, but did not provide the correct amounts.

Kobus Marais, former DA spokesperson on defence, told the publication last week that former defence minister Thandi Modise had observed during her term that there were too many generals costing defence too much money. However, no steps were taken to cut posts.

According to the latest defence force annual report up to March 2023, there are a total of 15 generals at army levels 15 and 16. They fall into the ranks of lieutenant-general and general - the equivalents of deputy director-general and director-general in the rest of the civil service.

Only General Rudzani Maphwanya, the defence force chief, is a full general. This is the group that benefits the most from the housing allowances. The annual report does not specify the annual cost for the military per rank, but groups levels 13 to 16 together. This group cost the defence force R382 million in that financial year.

Since then, the generals - along with the rest of the army and civil service - have received a salary increase of 4.7% as of 1 April this year. According to defence analyst Helmoed-Römer Heitman, there were a total of 59 785 uniformed soldiers in the SANDF last year, including 199 brigadiers-general and higher-ranking officers. This number has since increased. The civilian component of the department of defence has 8 819 staff members, including the staff of Armscor, which is supposed to provide the SANDF with a procurement service.

"Armscor's personnel structure includes several senior managers who earn even more than the head of the SANDF," says Heitman.

He adds that, while there are probably too many generals for the size of the military, there are many civilians who are excessively compensated.

"One can expect that there are highly paid specialists in the military health service, due to their professional qualifications.

"There are also quite a few colonels and - on the noncommissioned officers side - warrant officers. However, those are sources of expertise and experience, so the numbers are normal.

"What's more concerning is precisely the losses of experienced rank groups to voluntary separation packages over the past two years. The same losses aren't reflected among the top ranks. In fact, quite a few of the top generals don't even retire at the age of 60, which - in turn - interferes the rank advancement [opportunities] for the lower ranks," he says.

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