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ANTI-POACHING

# Military veterans demand justice for dismissals

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UMKHONTO we Sizwe (MK) and the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) military veterans who participated in anti-poaching operations for over 14 years say they were unexpectedly dismissed without compensation, benefits or permanent employment they were promised.

The veterans were deployed in 2010 to combat poaching in marine and coastal areas under an initiative led by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (formerly known as Daff).

The anti-poaching operation was a presidential initiative under then-president Jacob Zuma. They were tasked with combating poaching, particularly in marine and coastal areas where organised crime syndicates had long exploited the natural resources.

"Their commitment and sacrifices have significantly reduced poaching activity, earning them the trust and gratitude of local communities.

"However, despite their indispensable role, they are now being disregarded by the very department that has relied on them for over a decade," said a statement.

"The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) has abruptly informed them that their contracts will officially terminate on

31 March 2025, leaving them without any employment security, pension, or benefits for their years of dedicated service."

The veterans believe that the termination of their contracts is unjust. Just days before their termination, the department issued new uniforms to them for stock-taking duties. Questions were also raised about the mismanagement of the department as well as financial irregularities.

These aggrieved military veterans also believe that the department has flouted the Military Veterans Act 18 of 2011, which provides a legal framework for the recognition, support, and benefits of military veterans.

"The Act outlines their entitlements, including health care, housing, education, employment assistance, and burial support with the aim to honour and improve the welfare of those who served in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and other recognised military formations."

If the department refuses to comply, the veterans say they will be forced to take legal action and pursue every available remedy. They warned that the termination of contracts poses a direct threat to South Africa's conservation efforts.

Department spokesperson Peter Mbelengwa confirmed that 35 military veterans received letters in respect

of the end date of their Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) employment contracts.

"Letters were sent indicating the end date as per the signed employment agreements. The employment contracts were not prematurely terminated," he said.

Mbelengwa clarified that the veterans were compensated as agreed upon for completing specific duties outlined in their employment contracts.

"Twenty-seven of the 35 military veterans have reapplied for the next intake of EPWP employment opportunities, and these applications will be considered in line with the government's relevant recruitment policies," he said.

He further stated that there was no record of any promise made to the veterans of permanent employment.

"The employment contract signed clearly states that 'no employee is considered permanent,'" said Mbelengwa.

He said 12 of the 35 military veterans are 60 years old and above, which means they also qualify for old persons' grants should they not be reappointed in the current recruitment process.

"The department has noted and will respect due processes as, at the end of March 2025, the military veterans registered a case at the CCMA," he concluded.