

NSM/NDP's Included

Lawmakers have finalised and adopted the Military Veterans Bill, but questions remain about how much it will cost to provide benefits to former fighters and who qualifies.

The state law adviser's office told the portfolio committee on defence, that it would cost an estimated R1.6 billion to implement the bill in the current medium-term expenditure framework.

The figure of R6.4bn contained in the memorandum to the bill - already a vast reduction from earlier estimates running into tens of billions - was termed a "typing error".

The correction prompted questions from the opposition as to how the fledgling department of military veterans arrived at the amount.

Director General Tsepe Motumi said the figure was "what Cabinet approved" and conceded that the amount "may go up as we move into full-scale implementation".

There would be a gradual phasing in after the legislation was passed by Parliament and enacted, he said.

Democratic Alliance MP David Maynier said the processing of the bill had been shambolic from the start and it was frustrating that the department had never been able to properly say how much it would cost to implement.

The bill was initially sent back to the department because it had been tabled without costing and was then returned without the issue fully resolved.

Deputy Defence and Military Veterans Minister Thabang Makwetla argued that an exception had been made because of the difficulty ascertaining the number of ex-soldiers that would be affected.

Maynier asked that his objections on the issue be placed on the record and said the drafting process had been shambolic throughout.

"I'm concerned that the department has never been able to properly brief us about the cost implications and the assumptions therein," Maynier said.

He wanted to know how a figure of R7.4bn provided by Alexander Forbes financial services had shrunk to R1.6bn.

An earlier controversy about whether former apartheid army conscripts would qualify for health, housing and pension benefits under the bill was resolved when Motumi indicated that they would.

"The bill is very clear: if they are veterans and they pass the means test, they will," he told reporters.

Months ago, statements by Makwetla led the Council of Military Veterans' Organisations to accuse the government of planning to leave white men, who were conscripted into the army by the apartheid regime, out in the cold. **The deputy minister later said they would be included,**

The bill aims to provide benefits to all former soldiers in the former South African Defence Force, liberation movement armies and ex-armies of Bantustan states.

It remains unclear how many of those who fought in the country's liberation war from 1960 to 1994 would be entitled to state assistance once it becomes law --- partly because lists are being updated and partly because the means test has not been defined.

Motumi said that at this point there were 57,500 registered veterans, but the "figure is changing every day" as more came forward.

During the drafting process, the ANC repeatedly warned of the urgent need to address the frustration of those who fought in the liberation movement, but had been left without state assistance.

Makwetla warned that the turmoil in Zimbabwe was a historical lesson in what happened when former freedom fighters were abandoned by the state.

The support of veterans of the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe played a crucial role in President Jacob Zuma's accession to the presidency of the ANC in 2007.

Maynier said it was a noble aim to take care of former fighters, but he was not satisfied that the bill provided for "bullet proof" processes to verify whether somebody was a veteran and who his dependants were.

The Democratic Alliance is likely to oppose the bill because of this and because of the confusion about its final cost implications for the country.