

War vets bill could blow up in SA's face

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By Deon de Lange

Former members of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, carry a coffin containing the remains of Johnny Makhathini. Poor data on how many Struggle veterans there are, including a Department of Defence register that includes 15-year-olds, does not bode well for sensible legislation. Picture: Siyabonga Mosunkutu

Plans to provide veterans of the Struggle with pensions and other benefits are moving swiftly ahead, despite mounting concern about inadequate planning, affordability and the practical implications of the move.

The Military Veterans' Bill, which was approved by the cabinet in November and introduced in Parliament early this year, promises pensions, subsidised housing, health care, education, transport, business opportunities and other benefits to those who fought both for and against the apartheid regime.

The Department of Military Veterans hired Alexander Forbes to research how much the plan is likely to cost taxpayers. An initial estimate suggested the figure could be between R20 billion and R65bn, depending on the number of veterans who would qualify. And herein lies the problem. Nobody knows.

Between the Defence Department, the ANC and the PAC – whose veterans are most likely to benefit from the proposed law – and the multitude of associations representing different veterans' groups, nobody can say with any accuracy how many military veterans there are in South Africa.

The SA National Military Veterans Association (SANMVA), which was established in 2008 at the behest of the Defence Department in order to have a single organisation speaking for all veterans, does not know how many members it represents.

SANMVA president Kebby Maphatsoe could therefore not provide the National Assembly's defence committee with a profile of veterans – their age, income level and geographic distribution – information essential to the costing and eventual implementation of the bill.

The response by ANC committee members to opposition questions about the lack of credible planning information was telling. "This is a moral issue. It is not a money issue. If we are going to start talking about money here then we are losing the plot," said ANC MP Jerome Maake.

And when it became clear that opposition parties were unwilling to give the Department of Military Veterans a blank cheque, Deputy Defence Minister Thabang Makwetla issued this warning: “If we ignore the welfare of former soldiers, we may live to regret it.”

He went a step further, comparing South Africa’s veterans to those of Zimbabwe. “In Zimbabwe, after independence in the 1980s, they did nothing (for veterans). The failure to integrate (them) is part of the cause for that country’s instability today.”

Freedom Front Plus MP Pieter Groenewald immediately objected to “any veterans group or organisation holding a gun to the country’s head”.

The initial costing was based on figures provided by the Defence Department, which claims that the Certified Personnel Register (CPR) for the former non-statutory forces (NSF) – Umkhonto we Sizwe and the Azanian People’s Liberation Army – contains about 54 000 names.

However, the final CPR submitted to Parliament in 2002 as part of the defence force’s Final Integration Report – and signed off by then SANDF chief Siphwe Nyanda – listed only 44 303 names. Of these, 21 212 members integrated into the SANDF, leaving only 23 091 former NSF members who would now qualify as veterans.

Makwetla told MPs recently that more names were being added to this list every day. But the Demobilisation Amendment Act of 2001 legally brought the process of integrating former NSF members to an end in 2002, effectively closing the register. It is therefore unclear by what legal authority the Defence Department continues to add names to it.

It also raises the question: where have these members been for the past 17 years? According to the Defence Department’s own data, nearly 30 percent of those on the register are aged between 15 and 35 years. In 1994, the youngest of these fighters would not yet have been born. To complicate matters, the bill broadens the definition of military veteran to include anyone who “rendered military service to any of the military organisations which were involved on all sides of South Africa’s liberation war from 1960 to 1994; those who served in the then Union Defence Force before 1961, and those who became members of the SANDF after 1994”.

By this definition, about 800 000 former soldiers would qualify, including 650 000 national servicemen, some 20 000 members of the Cape Corps and about 3 000 former members of the Azanian National Liberation Army. And with the abolition of the commando system, a further 55 000 former Reserve Force members would now also be able to claim benefits.

This is more than 15 times the number of veterans on which the upper estimate of R65bn was based. Although the bill proposes a “means test” for many of the benefits – thus disqualifying most veterans – the lack of credible data makes it impossible to estimate how many veterans would qualify and what this would cost. And before any law can be approved, Parliament is legally obliged to determine what the financial implications of the law would be to the state. Other government departments have also conceded that the figures are a thumb-suck.

The root of the problem appears to lie with the Ministerial Task Team on Military Veterans appointed by Defence and Military Veterans Minister Lindiwe Sisulu to develop the recommendations that have culminated in the draft bill.

DA MP David Maynier has slammed the task team's report – which cost more than R800 000 – as “amateurish” and “a huge waste of money”. The Institute for Security Studies was equally scathing, telling MPs on Tuesday that the report “does not include any references to baseline data on military veterans”, and cautioning that “poor research results in poor policy and legislation”.

“Effective policy on military veterans cannot be designed or implemented in the absence of accurate data on the scope and range of the military veteran's problem,” it said.