

Rebels "regret" SANDF deaths

Rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR) regretted the action that led to 13 SA National Defence Force soldiers dying in the strife-torn country, the SA National Defence Force (SANDF) said on Tuesday (26 March).



"On Sunday morning (24 March) the leaders of the rebels came to the base, and discussed what happened on the ground and they said they regretted exchanging fire with SANDF soldiers," said Brigadier General Xolani Mabanga.

"Since then there haven't been any threats against the SANDF. We are not taking anything lightly and have precautionary measures in place to ensure SANDF members are safe on the ground," he said.

Mabanga said they had not received any instructions regarding troop movements and the current death toll from Saturday's battle had not changed.

"The current figures are accurate," said Mabanga.

Apart from the 13 killed, 27 soldiers were wounded and one was missing in action. Mabanga could not comment on media reports alleging what happened on the ground.

Beeld newspaper reported on Tuesday (26 March) that beyond the official toll of those injured, killed and missing, six special forces operators were also killed in the fighting.

The newspaper reported that the SANDF had become a target for reportedly helping CAR President Francois Bozize flee the country into the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

According to the report, top structures in the SANDF were warned by senior officers last week that the CAR mission amounted to "suicide".

Air Force on standby

SA Air Force aircraft were also put on standby on Monday night (25 March), but because of financial constraints the Gripen fighters were not armed with weapons and did not have an attack capacity.

SANDF soldiers reportedly struggled on the ground because of a lack of logistics and air support.

Soldiers had to ask French parachutists for essential equipment. Only one doctor was present. The report also stated that renewed fighting broke out on Monday between SANDF soldiers and rebels.

The Democratic Alliance said that new reports on the "disaster" in CAR showed the need for a parliamentary inquiry.

"The SANDF soldiers evidently acquitted themselves well under fire, in circumstances where they were vastly outnumbered by rebel forces," said DA defence spokesman David Maynier in a statement.

"But in the end they appear to have been left dangling, without the necessary military support. We need to get to the bottom of why the SANDF was deployed in the CAR, effectively to support President Francois Bozize."

The DA had written to the speaker of the National Assembly Max Sisulu, requesting the establishment of a multi-party *ad hoc* committee to conduct an inquiry in the SANDF's deployment in CAR.

"In the end, President Jacob Zuma's decision to deploy the SANDF in the CAR effectively to support President Francois Bozize has been a complete disaster," said Maynier.

Source: Sapa via I-Net Bridge

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