



## The army enters!

One of the more curious announcements in Finance Minister, Tito Mboweni's, Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) was the deployment of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to assist with the sewerage crisis affecting the Vaal River water system (see our Newsmaker on Emfuleni, [municipaliq.co.za](http://municipaliq.co.za)). This Personality considers the incongruous new entrant to local government and what its role might be.

### Ill-fitting emergency measure?

According to the MTBPS:

"We are dealing decisively and urgently with the water crisis in the Vaal River System. Our immediate focus is to mobilise short-term financing by reprioritising funds and increasing capacity. I have asked the President and the Minister of Defence for the military to assist with engineering and other expertise to resolve the crisis in the Vaal River System. I am happy to report that approval has been granted. The generals in charge have already started working on solutions." ([www.treasury.gov.za](http://www.treasury.gov.za))

For many observers, short of a war-time situation or a clear, immediate crisis like flooding, calling on the SANDF for engineering expertise may seem rather drastic. The Constitution makes provision for the SANDF to be deployed "for service in the preservation of life, health or property; for service in the provision or maintenance of essential services; and for service in support of any department of state for the purpose of socio-economic upliftment" ([www.dailymaverick.co.za](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za)) - a broad mandate indeed, but one conventionally used in a limited way.

Clearly, Mboweni is of the view that the Vaal water crisis has reached crisis proportions that warrant military involvement, perhaps informed more by his dim view on the Giyani Water project "a cesspool of corruption, plagued by malfeasance" ([www.iol.co.za](http://www.iol.co.za)), than by support for the army *per se*.

Journalist, Stephen Grootes, enthused about the decision "it is a symbol of how seriously government takes their problem. It is hard to think of a stronger symbol than the sight of soldiers and military equipment literally declaring war on service delivery problems", while a more cautious Eric Pelsler, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) argued that "there can be no greater admission of municipal failure than the deployment of the military" ([www.dailymaverick.co.za](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za)).

The SA Army Engineer Formation, according to Brigadier General Mafi Mgobozi, director of corporate communications, compiled a reconnaissance report by the end of last month ([www.defenceweb.co.za](http://www.defenceweb.co.za)), and preparation is underway to deploy technical task teams, with a visit to the area scheduled for next week ([www.businesslive.co.za](http://www.businesslive.co.za)).

Certainly, the turn-around times have been impressive so far; with Major-General TT Xundu reporting that a conceptual assessment (prior to a technical municipal assessment) had been completed a week after Mboweni's announcement (albeit with unsurprising findings):

"We found that the plants and substations are dysfunctional and not working. There are leakages and pipes that are burst, and all those things are threatening the welfare of the people" ([www.businesslive.co.za](http://www.businesslive.co.za)).

But Xundu warned "We are going to look at our limited engineering capabilities and see what we can do assist, in particular the substations and the plants" in a project planned to take a year in cooperation with "all stakeholders", whilst combatting the work of thieves - "All of that area will be declared a military zone, so that the military can move in and secure the area, and make sure that the equipment that is going to be used there is not going to be stolen or vandalised" ([www.businesslive.co.za](http://www.businesslive.co.za)).

The last comment is the sort of tenor that one might expect of the Army, and one that might disquieten civil society, but NGO, Save the Vaal Environment, SAVE, has welcomed the intervention ([www.businesslive.co.za](http://www.businesslive.co.za)).

This would of course not be the first such civil programme, with the SANDF assisting in civil works such as bridge building and assessment in the Eastern Cape, and sanitation provision in the North West earlier this year ([www.defenceweb.co.za](http://www.defenceweb.co.za)).

What remains to be seen is whether the SANDF will be the best fit for the job, and if so, whether it should be deployed elsewhere, and how this might overlap with MISAs technical support teams ([municipaliq.co.za](http://municipaliq.co.za)). For local government it is a shameful admission of delivery failure that will hopefully be overcome, preempting any further such action.

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