Transcript of an interview with Siphiwe Nyanda, Johannesburg, 5 November 2015

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Before the election

TT To what extent was Nelson Mandela involved in shaping the state with regard to the defence force?

SN If you are talking about state power, that had already begun with the Transitional Executive Council (TEC), but you must remember that Mandela was not there in the TEC, though he led there indirectly because agreements at the TEC fed mostly from decisions made at CODESA. So he was in charge in many ways. People like Joe Modise, who chaired the TEC sub-Council on Defence, reported to Mandela through the NEC. I also was in the NEC and was co-chair of the Joint Military Coordinating Committee (JMCC) with General Meiring.

The JMCC did most of the preparation for what kind of defence force we were looking at: what the parameters of integration would be; what policies would guide us. The defence force as it was to exist after April 1994 was formed from discussions we had at the JMCC which were fed by Joe Modise into the TEC sub-council on defence. So those were the core structures that shaped what was to become of the defence force in 1994.

TT Mandela met Meiring before the election: were you present at any of those meetings?
Not with Mandela. Perhaps there were other meetings Mandela had had with the military, but not in my presence.

**Meeting the SADF top five**

The first meeting I know of where we met Meiring was where he led a delegation from the SADF. It was Meiring, who was still chief of the army; the chief of the SADF, Liebenberg; the chief of the air force; the chief of the navy and the Surgeon General, the top five of the defence Force; and the chief of intelligence. They came to meet us: Joe Modise, Chris Hani, Jo Nhlanhla and Mo Shaik. We met at the Admiralty in Cape Town. We were sent by the president of the ANC who said, ‘These people want to talk,’ and we met them. That was our first meeting and it set the practical engagements. That was in April 1993, the first practical engagement about how we were going to go about the formation of the SANDF. Integration really happened post-1994, but the parameters were laid before in 1993. There was some good rapport there, but obviously it was a feeling exercise and you could see they were suspicious of some people.

But in fact even before that I had, with Joe Nhlanhla and Jacob Zuma, met some of their military intelligence people at a farm in Pretoria. Roelf Meyer was there and the chief of the air force, Pierre Steyn.

So they were accepting that the ANC was the future government?

From the time of the unbanning of the ANC they were accepting that the ANC would be the government but they wanted to explore, to have discussions. But mostly those discussions were led by intelligence, people like Dr. Niel Barnard, people from military intelligence and Steyn.

At what point did you become aware that Meiring would be asked to stay on to head the defence force?

That was the plan we had worked out. I briefed the National Executive Committee several times. We identified certain strategic posts – we wanted Meiring to continue as head of the new SANDF – but we identified certain critical posts which we would assume from MK.

I briefed the NEC. We needed to create a post of deputy chief of SANDF – there was no such post. We also needed, if establishing that post was going to take a long time, for MK to take the post of Chief of Staff. We needed two or three people on the military council, on the Defence Staff Council as it was called then.

That was early on. I was briefing the ANC about the strategic interventions that we needed to make because we realised that most of the senior people in MK, like me, General Moloi, General Masondo and General Ngwenya, had not
undergone military staff training. We had not been to military academy, which is not about the military as such but about military staff duties and we realised that we were going to have to undergo certain courses, army staff courses, battle handling and so on and so forth, conventional staff duties which we had not done in MK. We had trained to be commanders in the field but not staff duties.

Meiring knew, before 1994, that he was going to be the head of the SANDF. Even as he presided over the JMCC he knew because he had recently been appointed – Liebenberg moved and made him commander of the Defence Force and made Pretorius the chief of the Army. He had had discussions with Mandela and I think he had been assured that he was going to be the head of the defence force and that this was going to be an orderly thing and not an imposition of MK people on the SANDF; that the transition would be a smooth one and that we would agree to orderly interventions. We would immediately have to assume certain positions in the SANDF to ensure that we had influence in the integration process, in the running of the SANDF and its transformation.

Integration

SN The integration process was informed by several things.

In the first place there had been agreement before the TEC process started, that we would have a single national defence force come the day democracy was established. It had been agreed that national defence force would be based on equal treatment of all the forces that were in the country at the time, which were the SADF and the bantustan armies as well as Umkhonto WeSizwe and APLA and whatever forces of liberation were in existence and were in agreement with the processes that would be determined from the World Trade Centre which established the Transitional Executive Council. There would be a Joint Military Coordinating Committee (JMCC) in which all the forces would participate on an equal footing. There would subcommittees: a subcommittee on intelligence; a subcommittee on the logistics; a subcommittee on this and that – all the facets that comprise what a defence force is and we would then determine what kind of defence force it would be and determine all the processes, the phases, training and so on.

Consultation within MK

As we were fashioning these agreements, even before then, we had solicited opinions from our own forces as Umkhonto WeSizwe of which I was then chief of staff. We had gone on a briefing tour of the camps to inform our cadres about what was happening: that there would be a new defence force and what would inform this new defence force.
Was Mandela part of that?

I remember Oliver Tambo. I went with Oliver Tambo, with Chris Hani, with Cyril Ramaphosa. I can’t quite remember if Mandela was part of it, I think he may have delegated it. All the photos I have are of Tambo and Chris. That was 1992, 1993.

Mandela was involved in the internal meetings, conferences we had, because many of the cadres of Umkhonto WeSizwe were inside the country at the time. The majority, those people who had fought, were already inside the country because about 1991 there had been the cessation of armed action and there was a repatriation of many of the cadres of MK. So most of the meetings were inside the country and in the form of conferences that the leadership of the ANC attended. I remember that Mandela attended an important conference in Nelspruit, where he pledged money for assistance of comrades who needed some sort of assistance. In fact we all needed some sort of assistance and he was advocating for projects to sustain us in the period leading up to the elections and the integration of forces.

Some people wanted to spend the money: ‘Let’s eat the money’. Mandela was not very happy about that and he advised them not to eat the money – but it actually happened that way.

We had other conferences before the election. Though there was another in Tanzania, these were mainly internal because we were trying to woo the former TBVC states to be on our side in their thinking leading up to integration – we realised that although these were forces created by apartheid to divide us, some were now sympathetic to us and we wanted them on our side during the JMCC process and to think like us about integration.

Many, like Ramushwana in Venda, were very supportive and he was also in the TEC. Holomisa in the Transkei had always been supportive and had even sponsored some of the conferences and meetings we had there. Only the Bophuthatswana Defence Force didn’t fit in – the person who represented Bop was a brigadier of the SADF who had been seconded to Bophuthatswana. The Ciskei was not very supportive because Gqozo was at its head, but we managed to woo the soldiers of the Ciskei to our side so that they would have the same view as us about the integration process because we knew that the SADF would try to drive a wedge between us to get advantage for themselves in the discussions we were going to have. I think it was a good thing that this happened.

We prepared well for the integration process. We briefed our comrades. There was a lot of unhappiness in the first place with the cessation of armed action, but we were able to persuade the cadres about the processes that were going to unfold. We let them make input into that so that when we got into the
that process it was not anything arbitrary that was decided by the military leadership, by Joe Modise, or by Gebuza - it was something that was a consensus of Umkhonto WeSizwe.

**Integration difficulties**

Of course there were difficulties in practical implementation.

In the first place our cadres had to be assembled in one place. Some of them were deployed in the National Peacekeeping Force. There were problems there as well, which was in the nature of things when you find two formerly hostile forces, one of which was assuming the ascendant position in relation to everything that was happening.

Even in Wallmansthal, a military base of the SADF where they were in charge, there were bound to be problems. And there were also problems with us from the command structure of Umkhonto WeSizwe, even though we deployed people there, very senior people, such as the former chief of the army who was then senior in Umkhonto WeSizwe, Gen Romano. He was the person in charge of ensuring that the integration process ran smoothly. We deployed people at all levels. There were difficulties both with the SADF people deployed there to manage this integration process and also I have to admit with our side, because everyone who is deployed there wants to become a general and of course that’s not always going to be possible. People had to be graded in accordance with their training, in accordance with their education, in accordance with many things.

There were also sifting mechanisms of people who were not going to be suitable, some of it voluntary - people could volunteer not to come into the SANDF but integrate and then leave the defence force.

So there were all those difficulties and all those clashes in the process. At one point I was asked to go to Wallmansthal because there were problems there and immediately I got there I was set upon by comrades. I was with General Moloi, who was chief of operations, and they set upon us and the car I was driving was damaged. One heard there had been problems with food, etcetera, and of course there were also reports that many of those who were responsible for those things had been on drugs. That was a very unfortunate incident, on the day just after the elections I think, or when the election results were about to be announced.

**TT** When did they assemble for integration?

**SN** Long before the election, from around November, December 1993 or even January, a few months before the elections. Our intention was to have a situation where, come 27 April 1994, we would already have formed the new defence force. We would have a certified personnel register of all the people
from the SADF, all from Umkhonto WeSizwe. Our personnel staff was compiling a list of all the cadres from Umkhonto WeSizwe who were to be integrated and it had to be submitted well in advance so that they become on that day members of the new SANDF. Of course administratively it was easier for the other side.

One of the things that also happened was that the number of Umkhonto weSizwe cadres was not as clear-cut as that of the SADF, because there were people who had trained in Angola and so on whose real names we didn’t have. So we had to compile all those things, and convert all their pseudonyms to the proper names and compile a list with proper IDs and checking of past criminal records and education, verification. A lot of that took place internally before we took these things to Wallmansthal where people were going to be integrated. So there were a lot of teething problems.

Also, the people who demobilised voluntarily were paid money, something like R30,000, depending on their track record and how long they had served. When we joined Umkhonto weSizwe the intention was not necessarily to become soldiers - we were really fighting for freedom. Some of us were doctors some of us were lawyers, and wanted to go back to their professions and practice in a free South Africa. So many people left and went to the private sector and became doctors again, while some took their skills into the defence force and into other departments of government.

There were difficulties. It was not as if there were no problems, after all there had been rebellions in the past in the camps of Umkhonto WeSizwe. Each detachment had its own problems, but the main problems we encountered when we came back were people who had left the country just at the time of the unbanning of the ANC, young cadres, those that we recruited from inside who had not even gone abroad - those were the people that caused most of the problems.

After the unbanning of the ANC there were still activities that we were involved in, because there was a lot of violence against communities in the different townships both from IFP and other forces, the third forces, and there was still mobilisation on our part to resist that kind of violence. Many of those people regarded themselves as part of Umkhonto WeSizwe. And when we were then establishing the certified personal register we also regarded them as part of Umkhonto weSizwe, because they had been active in the armed struggle against the third force and so on, but many of them had not experienced the discipline of fully trained MK cadres and many of them were subject to some of the machinations of the enemy, like the spreading of drugs and so on in townships.
They had never been subjected to the real discipline of the ANC, had never received real political education as had many of those who had stayed for a long time. Even those who went outside to places like Uganda and Iringa also did not have that much time to be grounded in the politics of the ANC, because a lot of the ANC leadership who had based themselves in the camps like Jack Symons and Mark Shope were no longer there. There were no longer resident political commissars in those camps in the same mould as Jack Symons. So you had commissars but not the quality that you had at that time when people stayed for years and got political grounding and understanding. Even some those who left, left by air and went to Zimbabwe and Uganda, got training there and came back as properly trained soldiers, but the kind of political understanding they had was very different from those who had been trained before.

No other way

TT Looking back, was the path taken the best under the circumstances.

SN All I can say is that we tried to do our best, we in leadership consulted all the cadres on the ground. We sought the participation of the most senior leadership of the ANC in that consultation, the participation of Nelson Mandela, Sisulu, the Secretary-General of the ANC and the Treasurer-General because a lot of the issues also had to with resources. There was all round understanding of the problem and all-round consultation. In the military we’re not even supposed to have conferences but we did have them because we were a political army and we understood where we came from, where those cadres came from.

In the nature of the transition that we undertook I can’t see that we could have had any other way, because in the first place it was negotiated - we had a cessation of armed hostilities and the ANC was unbanned. Naturally people had to come back home and the people who went to persuade them were not even the military, they were the Sisulu’s, the Rivonia triallists who went to Zambia to talk to the cadres, with the Alfred Nzo’s and so on. It was not even us. That cadreship had to be persuaded and also use their own understanding informed by many things like the Kabwe conference which had intimated that there was an interest in part of South African society to reach a negotiated settlement and OR had indicated that. People knew that there were discussions because these things were all over the media all over the world - the Thabo’s, the Maharaj’s, the Zuma’s were involved in discussions with interest groups and influential groups from South Africa. And then Mandela was going to be released, inevitably.

So, there was always that likelihood that things might not go the way in which many people thought they would in the past, that there would be a rumbling
of tanks coming from Oshoek into Pretoria and that we would preside over a scorched earth. And given the number of years of this transition, I can’t see any other way apart from what we did because we were compelled to begin to talk to our counterparts in the military. Mandela said, ‘Those people want to talk.’ There was a CODESA process which was going to lead to this Transitional Executive Council, spurred on by events like the Boipatong massacre and the killing of Chris Hani. So there had to be a way in which we speeded up the process and of course anything done with a lot of speed could lead to some mistakes and people could overlook certain things.

The issue of suspension of armed action bad been addressed by people like Chris, people like Sisulu. There was a lot of unhappiness. When the leadership came from jail they went to Lusaka and met a lot of dissatisfied cadres and explained to them. What we were dealing with really from the time that I took over as chief of staff was integration, what kind of defence force are we looking at, what are we going to be doing, what is going to happen to the cadreship, the violence that is happening, this National Peacekeeping Force that would intervene in areas where there was violence against the communities.

Transformation strategy

TT  You say a force prepared for war had some difficulty switching to preparing for peace – would you say that within the SADF too there was difficulty in reorienting their thinking?

SN  I think their difficulties came later. Initially the whole public service were given an undertaking by the politicians that their jobs were secure, so there wasn’t going to be anybody losing their jobs from the old public service, including the military. So when we moved to democracy the security forces were assured of their position until they were pensioned off. As a result the structure was necessarily going to be bloated. It was not going to be efficient as it was going to include people who were not in the initial design, like MK, like the whole of the SADF, like the TBVC forces. It was going to be a bloated force which we were going to manage down through natural attrition and other ways. That is where the unhappiness came about. Hence we decided on the kind of strategic interventions that we had to make at the position level: who was going to be responsible for what?

You asked whether Meiring knew he was going to be chief, yes he did. That in itself was assuring them. So they had no fear, because they were the dominant force and the discussions even at the JMCC were dominated by their views, even things that we accepted with difficulty, like the march – we were going to have their march, not the Soviet goose step. So most of the systems were theirs
as per agreement, but of course we were going to make certain interventions and try to make changes later.

Our primary aim was to ensure that this defence force looks different after integration and is going to look different in the long term. So with our intervention at leadership level we were going to ensure that when we took over leadership we would be able to say, in terms of appointments, ‘This one is going to do this. This one is going to command the special forces, critical areas where we needed to intervene. That resulted in some angst. But it was a strategic intervention that we wanted to make because perhaps the special forces need that kind of person. Sometimes we didn’t even replace them with our own Umkhonto weSizwe people but with one of theirs if we knew they were good. Transformation cannot just be looked at in terms of colour but at how you wanted the institution to be transformed or revolutionised. So sometimes we replaced the commander of the special forces with somebody who comes from outside who we know is good and is going to ensure that things we want to happen in the special forces happen as quickly as possible and that the special forces will be transformed and cannot be used as a means of destabilisation of the new democracy. We intervene somewhere, and put one of our people there because we know we need to have someone like that there.

We addressed the issue of people who may not be supportive of the change either through natural attrition or voluntary packages, but only when we were in charge would we be able to do that. Only when a Gen Nyanda is chief of the SANDF and General Ngwenya is chief of personnel, when we had a surgeon general who can address these issues, only then will we be able to address these questions, Of course it doesn’t mean if you have a black surgeon general things will go well, sometimes people still become unhappy because they think the process is wrong. It depends on what people do to address some the problems that affect the organisation. So it’s a very complex process.

For instance, there were people I recruited or found when I joined MK, some of them childhood friends. When we come back we integrate and some of them are sergeant majors and some of them are even my neighbours. Now, in the military you are not supposed when you’re a general to fraternise with others who are not officers. But we had to change that. The only difference is that I’m a general now and he is a sergeant, but I have known him from the struggle, we were even in the same machinery, I was his commander in the Transvaal urban machinery. Now it can’t be that because of his level of education and his rank and everything that was considered in becoming a sergeant, that if I have something at my place I can’t call him to come and join us. So some of those things had to be removed.
**Meiring report**

**TT** Regarding the Meiring report, there is a question whether they believed it or thought it was something they could use.

**SN** I have no idea, but what is obvious to me is that they were keen to use that report because without informing us we just heard that they had given it to the president. So clearly it was going to work for them – why would they forward it if it was not going to be favourable to their designs? Look at the people who were alleged to have been involved, the entire top leadership of Umkhonto weSizwe who were integrated in the SANDF. And of course there was also the political side of Winnie and Holomisa who were in government at the time.

**TT** Do you think Meiring himself believed it?

Perhaps I should just read what I said. One of the things that was good, was what the president did after receiving the report. He set up a judicial commission, the Mohamed commission, almost immediately after receiving the report. Because I think that he himself, the president, did not believe it, in my view, immediately he read it. He set up the commission quickly in order to refute it, almost immediately the report came to the fore, in March 1998. The commission completed its work very quickly. Within a month it had investigated and come to the conclusion that there was no factual basis for all the allegations and that the process was flawed. The president then called us with Meiring and Verbeek, to say: What do you say about this thing? This is what I actually said, on behalf of my colleagues who were in the military:

> I am a soldier and the military is a very hierarchical structure. It is therefore very difficult for me to address the matter where I’m supposed to be an accused, vindicated or not, in the presence of my indirect accuser who happens to be my commander, the chief of the SANDF. I am only emboldened by the fact that I am given audience by the Commander in Chief and that the Ministers are in attendance as well.

I spoke about,

> the sense of relief that I feel. It is not that the commission found the report to be fraudulent and the process flawed as this was never in doubt in my mind. The relief came out of the speed with which the commission completed its work, in order that we might address the implications of the fraudulency and the flawed process and the reasons behind this so that it helps us chart our way out of this sorry mess that was brought upon us, and which was putting the defence force into disrepute.

I said that
we posit a few theories why we think that a fraudulent report was prepared and why the process was as flawed as it was.

- First of all to mislead the State President and the Government
- Secondly to discredit and undermine the new incumbents and to derail transformation

It may well be possible that some of the information in the report is true or half true, but the elaborate plan that the report describes was designed to mislead the President and the government about the involvement of new defence force personnel in a coup attempt. We do not believe there is a left-wing plot involving anybody to overthrow the government, but military intelligence is still caught in the old mindset where they were continuing to believe and give credence to misinformation of the kind given to the National Party leadership in order to justify the excessive repression, which was their wont in the old apartheid government.

We said that

the military intelligence is one of the most backward and untransformed departments of the DoD. One is painfully aware of its unreconstructed thinking, operations and ideological weddedness to the past as shown by a great deal of one-sidedness and bias in favour of the old-friends of the SADF in analyses and reports on Southern Africa and a preponderance of phantom left wing threat reports compared to graver right-wing ones. Such are the authors of this report. The findings of this commission simply mean one thing, that we are living dangerously, and you and the government Mr. President cannot rely on an important part of your security services.

If this was a banana republic we would then all perhaps be accused and put up against the wall and shot.

That’s what we said. I think it sums up what we thought about them and this report.

TT  Mandela made several references to threats to stability – what capacity did these elements have to destabilise the government.

SN  I don’t know to what extent Gen Meiring himself believed them, because they were his institution, essentially, they were the unreconstructed institution which he had always relied upon in the military council and the defence staff council of the past to feed them information even about ourselves. Obviously they were wont to use these practices of fabricating stories about us and about left wing threats from Africa which I am talking about here. Because even while I was in the Defence Staff Council we would get reports about things, whether it
is Africa or what is happening in Zimbabwe, half of which we never believed, some of us who had background of Umkhonto weSizwe.

Now whether he really believed this thing or believed some of it, I think it was his undoing. Meiring was a very clever man and for him to believe such trash, either he was naïve or his mind had been poisoned over a period of time and he really believed his military intelligence and some of the things that were peddled around for a very long time, such that even when there was a report which he shouldn’t have believed he relied upon it and took it to the president. Either he was misled by his military intelligence or he was very naïve for a man of his intelligence.

TT If that incident hadn’t happened, at what point would there have been a switch from a commander from the past to an ANC person?

SN Meiring had one year to go, he had just one year to go, he was going to leave at the end of 1999. In more ways than one I had been in line, which is why I resigned as a member of the National Executive Committee and went to the defence force, because there was a strategy we always had that I would succeed Meiring. There were reports in the media about the possibility of Matanzima and some people in the media were entertaining that and were being fed that, but it was inconceivable in many of the minds of MK people that somebody from a former Bantustan would take over the SANDF. General Moloi had reached retirement age, in fact we even extended his service by five more years, and he retired not at the statutory age of 60 but at 65. General Masondo as well. I was actually the most senior there.

At one point I decided that after my training I wanted to get more command experience on the ground, and I became commander of the Gauteng Command.

But then from what was happening in the SANDF at that time, even before this report, there were suspicions that there were machinations that they would continue to undermine any process that really transformed the SANDF and saw new leadership coming into being. The president and Joe Modise decided that I would be appointed deputy, they would create that post of deputy chief of the SANDF a year from Gen Meiring’s retirement, just more than a year before, so that at the time of this report I was deputy chief of the SANDF. So it was clear that that I would be chief of the SANDF.

Mandela at the Staff Council

There was an occasion [probably at the time of General Magnus Malan’s arrest] when Mandela came to address the defence staff council. He didn’t allow any questions, just came there as Commander-in-Chief. He had said he wanted to come to a Monday meeting. He didn’t allow any questions, just
came there as Commander-in-Chief. He had said he wanted to come to a Monday meeting. The essence of what he said is this – ‘we have gone through a difficult period of change. Our people fought for this democracy that we now enjoy. It is at a tenuous stage and if there are people who want to undermine this democracy and reverse things, the South African people with their bare fists will smash those tanks and will not be intimidated. They will defeat whoever wants to undermine this democracy that we are enjoying.

We had a conference in Nigeria on militarism and democracy while Sani Abacha was still the President. Mohamed Abubakar was chief of defence. Buhari was also there and he gave a paper but he had already retired. I also gave a paper. I had gone there with Masondo. We were talking about the military in democracy and I related the story about how in our democracy a putsch wouldn’t be tolerated, and I quoted this thing that Mandela said to the staff council, which included some of the people from the old regime who formed the military with us, that any reversal of this democracy would be intolerable to the people themselves and would be smashed.

Incidentally we formed a very great friendship with Abubakar who later, after Sani Abacha died, became president and I actually linked him and Mandela. You know the relations between Nigeria and we were very strained because Mandela wouldn’t tolerate what was happening there. So when Abubakar became president after Sani Abacha died, I called Mandela and said I have relations with the current president and I can call him so you can talk to each other and start the relations afresh, which he did.

So I was sure that when Abubakar became president he was not going to hang on to power because he knew about this thing!

Lesotho intervention - background

TT Regarding the intervention in Lesotho, to how do you see the military and political aspects, the implications and lessons?

SN What happened was that there was this SADC group set up at the Mauritius summit: Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Mozambique said yes to everything - they didn’t want to travel to all the meetings and there were constraints on them and they would agree with whatever it was that we decided. We would call them and we would say, ‘This is what was discussed’. It was the same with the Zimbabweans: ‘We are fine, as long as you inform us we support you’. The person who was consulted almost on a daily basis, was the deputy president of Botswana, Khama, who handled the matter on behalf of his country, and was talking to us. We went there a few times.

There was this view in our government that we should put a stranglehold around Lesotho, just encircle the country and let nothing in and out and they
would succumb. That view was popular with people at the political level. They used to go to Lesotho to try to persuade those people to abandon their arms and submit to the political authority. Over time attitudes hardened. I was playing the role of being prepared in case there was anything needed like stranglehold or encirclement, whatever options were put on the table.

And then at the critical moment, Khama was saying, ‘No, let’s go in there and put this thing in order’. All the time we would come and report. Events were moving very rapidly and I think at one point the decision had to be taken. We went to Botswana again and the decision was taken: Khama said, ‘Let’s go. I’m sending a battalion and it will pass through you’.

Before that, Mandela was flying to New York from Waterkloof [after the SADC summit in Mauritius]. I went with Joe Modise, with all that group, to brief him on the plane at Waterkloof to say that ‘The situation is unravelling and we want your decision.’ He told us, ‘Go to Botswana and whatever the decision that you take, fine, but you will have to sort it out with them.’ So Joe Modise and I and another person went to Botswana where the decision was taken.

Then we talked to Mozambique who said, ‘Fine,’ and we talked to Zimbabwe who said, ‘Go ahead, whatever you two have decided, the minister of defence of South Africa and the deputy president of Botswana.’

**Lesotho intervention decision**

The president was in New York now and we had to act on the decision in a matter of days. We had already appointed a commander, Colonel Hartsief, who was going to lead that mission, who would prepare the plans and bring them for approval.

So we go to Cape Town, where the acting president, Buthelezi, is. All of us are sitting at this huge table and we say this is what SADC has decided, that we must go in there and we already have the contingency plans to do that. There were two views amongst the people there. Some were of the view, ‘Let’s call Thabo,’ and we say, ‘But he is not the commander-in-chief and the commander-in-chief understands that when there is a decision of SADC, we must proceed.’

It is at this point that we brief Buthelezi. He sees there are two views, so he says, ‘What I’m going to do, I’m going to refer to the real commander-in-chief.’ So he goes to his office and leaves us there. He comes back, and he’s signed this thing. So Mandela said, ‘Yes, go ahead.’ Buthelezi had called the president and the president said, ‘But I told those chaps that if it is the decision of SADC they must go.’ The truth of the matter is that Mandela was always briefed about this thing and he approved.
TT  The intervention received a lot of criticism. On the other hand it seemed to have created a space for the Basotho to negotiate and to change the electoral system and so on

SN  The thing is when people plan a military operation they take all things into consideration, even the resistance that is going to be put up, because those rogue elements took a position that they would not surrender. And because of that we had already taken the decision that we were going to get into that base and infiltrate and subdue them. We lost some people. You can never say what will happen when you get to a place. Those people were armed, that’s why we were armed, to the teeth. If there was resistance we were going to suppress it. There was a military plan which took into account all the exigencies of the situation. Those rebels inflicted casualties upon us as we attacked them – the resistance was stiffer than we anticipated, but it was a war.

But the fact of the matter is that the objectives of the mission were achieved and were achieved in very little time: that rebellion suppressed, those people were arrested, and we managed to put Lesotho back onto a democratic footing even though it was for a short while and not forever.

South Africa’s regional military stance

TT  To what extent did these experiences affect the design of the army, the military strategy and doctrine? Initially the defence force’s main priority was defence of national sovereignty and regional involvement was a lesser priority. Then a later review raised the importance of regional support.

SN  There was a shift in policy because of the persistence of problems in Africa and because of a recognition by the political authorities, the ANC government, that peace in Africa is essential, that stability in Africa is essential to overall progress of the continent and to the stability of South Africa.

Even now we experience problems with economic migration and asylum seekers from Africa. There are many economic migrants in Africa because of instability in the continent. So it was considered then that it was important for South Africa to be involved.

The constraint initially was that we had a South Africa which had involved itself on the continent to destabilise the continent and the main instrument of destabilisation during the time of apartheid was the military. So when we began to transform the military and began to integrate the forces it was always going to take a lot of hesitation for that military to begin to be projected into Africa until such time as the continent realised that it was a changed military with a new leadership. It was always going to take time. That was why the doctrine was going to be more subdued in relation to the continent.
When I came into office, one of the first things I did, before going anywhere else, was to go to Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and visited the continent, and established relations to get the necessary kind of relations with all the militaries in Africa. We participated through SADC’s ISDC to ensure that they would begin to believe in us, because we realised very early that we were going to be required at the political level to play a role of leadership because of Mandela, and because of Mbeki after Mandela – and that there was no way in which they could project their power without the military.