

A large number of South Africans are armed and trained to be dangerous. What is to become of them?

Sociologist JACKLYN COCK explores the options and sounds some warnings.

AN IMPORTANT task in South Africa today is to create a common society; to build institutions which unify rather than divide us. The construction of a new defence force is perhaps the most difficult aspect of this broader project. At the same time we have to engage in a process of demilitarisation if we are to achieve a peaceful and democratic order.

The military has been a major obstacle to the achievement of democracy in Africa, and war has been a major contributor to the continent's current development crisis. It has meant not only death and injury to millions but has absorbed large amounts of national resources, caused ecological damage, destroyed infrastructure and social organisation, distorted production and created millions of displaced persons and refugees.

Throughout Africa, even when there has been a clear victory in liberation struggles against colonial rule, or cease-fires after periods of civil war, real peace has been short-lived and democratic government has not been realised.

One of the main reasons for this is the failure to demilitarise after periods of violent conflict. The successful transition to peace and democracy in South Africa depends on a process of demilitarisation which involves a shifting of both power and resources away from armed formations and military elites.

Demilitarisation does not only involve reductions in defence expenditure and force levels. There is a concomitant need to restructure the arms industry to make it more accountable and transparent; for informal disarmament, in the sense of bringing under control the present proliferation of small arms throughout the southern African region; for measures to dislodge the ideology of militarism, which

Elite pacts may menace the peace

Picture: THE ARGUS



military
may menace the peace



MK MANNE: Set for integration into military structures.

Picture: SOUTH

privileges violence as a legitimate solution to conflict; and, finally, for the creation of a representative and legitimate defence force that is accountable to parliament and subordinate to civilian control.

The creation of this new defence force must be linked to a demobilisation process. The potential of discontented demobilised soldiers for destabilisation, whether through political or criminal activities, is high. In Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique demobilised soldiers have been a destabilising force. The likelihood of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) returnees becoming involved in such activities increases with time if their material needs are not met.

Present thinking in defence circles seems to be to attempt to meet these needs through a process of integrating all ex-combatants into military structures. Many MK soldiers were integrated into the National Peace-keeping Force and a process of amalgamating all soldiers into a new South African National Defence Force is currently under way.

It has been suggested that this new structure will involve as many as 130 000 personnel. It would be an amalgamation of all existing armed formations, including the South African Defence Force (SADF), the armed forces of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei, and 16 000 MK soldiers, according to an April 1994 report in *The Star* citing MK Chief of Staff Sipiwe Nyanda.

The force levels envisaged are hugely inflated in terms of any realistic threat analysis. While it is agreed that the new army will be subordinate to civilian control, such an inflated, overblown force will absorb large amounts of national resources and block the process of demilitarisation in the southern African region.

South Africa today faces no conventional, external, military threats. For us, as in other societies that have recently undergone a

democratic transition, "the absence of a foreign threat may leave the military devoid of a legitimate military mission and enhance their inclination to think about politics", as Huntington puts it in *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Internal threats to political stability should be dealt with through strong and effective policing.

There is an argument favoured by some military elites that – at least in the short term – the size of the new defence force should be motivated by social rather than defence needs. This emphasis on social needs is informed by the immense political danger which a compulsory and harsh reduction in numbers would constitute.

However, the inflated force levels that the ongoing amalgamation of armed formations involves is highly problematic and a number of defence experts support the notion of a demobilisation process as an alternative.

This alternative is supported by Major-General A W Dennis, previously director of Military Assistance Overseas for the British Army. In an article published recently in the *South African Defence Review*, he argues: "Large numbers of MK personnel, largely untrained for conventional operations, will have either to be absorbed speedily into the new defence force (which will impose significant training requirements) or be otherwise suitably employed. The latter is preferable since the former will result in a defence force of a size well beyond South Africa's needs, with all that means for the economy."

Given the militarised nature of our past, it is important that the role of the new defence force should be limited to territorial defence and not expanded into socio-economic development. An overblown, inflated force will be more likely to be deployed in non-military activities.

However, the Chief of the South African National Defence Force, General Georg

Meiring, favours the deployment of the new defence force in economic development. In another recent *South African Defence Review* article, Meiring argues that one of the roles of the future army should be "to use its inherent public utility in promoting socio-economic development and providing other essential non-military services".

Such an enhanced and expanded "social role", however, may maintain the legitimacy of the military, absorb large amounts of national resources and block the demilitarisation process.

Meiring also refers to the "large number of individuals who have received military training of some sort and who will not be accommodated in the South African army". He suggests that an idea might be "to establish a Services Brigade to accommodate and train them" and that "this brigade would be used on non-military tasks, like building projects".

It is difficult to avoid the impression that such a structure would be used as a soak-pit to absorb MK ex-combatants and that it would create tensions and antagonisms in the process. Tasks of reconstruction need to be addressed through public works programmes and non-military community service schemes.

The ANC has come to be the major party in our government of national unity largely on the basis of its resistance role and its promise to create a "better life" for all our people. The fulfilment of this promise involves a large-scale diversion of resources away from the military to housing and jobs. At this moment there is a real danger that "elite pacting" between military groupings will block this process on which a stable and democratic future depends. ■

Jacklyn Cock is a member of the Military Research Group and Professor in the Sociology Department, University of the Witwatersrand.