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From iron fist to atrophied paw

A military comprised of rapacious low-lives is not necessarily invalidated as a fighting force. On the eve of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington memorably said of the English army - whom he also described as "the scum of the Earth" - "I don't know if they will scare the enemy, but they sure as God scare me".

So, recent criticism directed at the South African National Defence Force for a lack of discipline and sexually abusive behaviour does not negate it as potentially successful on the battlefield. Except that the new SANDF is not conceived as an aggressor but as a professional peace-keeping force, acting in support of President Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance. Instead of peacekeepers, however, the demographics of the SANDF are of an Aids-raddled bunch of old, fat, incompetent, drunken, sexual predators and child molesters.

According to the latest intelligence report by The Economist, South African soldiers in Burundi, who are helping to keep the peace as part of the United Nations corps, are increasingly unpopular with the local population. They have an "unfortunate reputation for excessive drinking and the abuse of prostitutes", claims the report. This follows on the disgrace of yet another South African military commander serving in the Democratic Republic of Congo, alleged to have been involved in sexual misconduct. He is the fourth senior commander in the DRC being investigated for similar charges by either the United Nations or the SANDF and was posted there in spite of a history of theft and dishonesty charges. On the northern border, a number of soldiers were arrested late last year for robbing and raping illegal immigrants, then forcing the women to strip naked and ford the crocodile-infested Limpopo back to Zimbabwe.

It's only the tiny South African peacekeeper force in the Sudan that has escaped accusations of rape, pillage and drunkenness. They are newly arrived, however, and the fact that 10 000 civilians a month are being slaughtered by the surrogates of the Sudanese government means that there are more pressing issues on the mind of the average potential complainant.

The SANDF has moved in the course of a mere decade from being hated but feared as the iron fist of the apartheid state, to being hated and derided as the atrophied paw of the new South Africa. The force that fought the Cubans to a standstill in Angola now blunders about with its trousers around its ankles. A minor success was when, with some difficulty and the help of its Southern African Development Community allies, it invaded Lesotho and managed to put down a minor rebellion. Its other battle banner was won a few months ago when it launched a pre-emptive armoured and infantry strike against the National Museum of Military History in Johannesburg, capturing its director and two curators at the cost of only the egg on its face. This fearless force was acting on intelligence that there were armoured vehicles and artillery pieces in the museum collection that had not been de-activated. Unfortunately for the red-faced Defence minister, it was all a clerical error, not an attempted insurrection.

From Defence ministry studies it transpires that some 25% of the SANDF is HIV-positive - other estimates are as high as 40%. According to the ministry, even more are deaf and clinically obese. Not surprising: more than half of the privates and non-commissioned officers are in the 30 to

60-year-old bracket, whereas the international benchmark is 18 to 22 years of age. Frighteningly, these guys are about to get R43 billion of new weaponry. Not to worry, though. Most of them won't be able to find the On switch. Speculation is that the navy may have to take delivery of its first super-sub from Germany as shipped cargo, since it lacks a racially-correct complement of sailors skilled enough to sail home the high-tech purchase.

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