Cde Mugabe said it was a known fact that the main grievance leading to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle was that of land which had been occupied by the Ian Smith regime in its futile attempts to slow down the progress of the liberation war.

The Zimbabwe Defence Forces should build on its successes of the past 25 years and regard shortcomings as outstanding challenges, ZDF Commander-in-Chief President Mugabe said yesterday. Cde Mugabe said since independence, ZDF engineers have also been engaged in the removal of anti-personnel landmines that were planted by the Ian Smith regime in its futile attempts to slow down the progress of the liberation war.

Cde Mugabe was addressing thousands of people who thronged Rufaro Stadium in Harare to witness the ZDF Silver Jubilee celebrations.

He said the 25th anniversary of the ZDF was historic and an integral component of the proud Zimbabwean story as earlier this year on April 18, the nation celebrated its Silver Jubilee of independence from British settler colonial rule and its various and oppressive institutions.

“Our attainment of independence on 18th April 1980 led to the formation of this prestigious force of committed and gallant sons and daughters of Zimbabwe in whom we have reposed the defence of our hard-won independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity,” said Cde Mugabe.

He said during the past 25 years, the defence forces have successfully undertaken a number of activities and yesterday's occasion gave them an opportunity to reflect on their past operations as well as come up with relevant future plans.

“The formation of the ZDF was a daunting task which involved the integration of three formerly warring and seemingly incompatible armies, namely the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (Zanla), the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (Zipra) and the Rhodesian Army.

“It was, indeed, a proud achievement of a young nation, which has become the envy of many countries,” he said.

Cde Mugabe said shortly after its establishment, the ZDF began to score notable achievements, both locally and internationally.

Locally, he said, the ZDF, in conjunction with other security forces, has successfully maintained peace, tranquillity and a stable environment for national, social and economic development.

The President said the forces over the years have also rendered assistance to civil authorities through joint operations with personnel from other ministries.

On the regional front, the ZDF participated in the Mozambique Campaign against the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo), the rebel movement that fought against the government of Mozambique from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

“Our intervention was in solidarity with the Mozambican government, which assisted us during our liberation struggle. The army operated jointly with the Forces of Mozambique in safeguarding the Beira, Tete and Limpopo Corridors against sabotage.

“These corridors form the core of our economic lifeline and constitute our gateway to the Indian Ocean,” said Cde Mugabe.

Cde Mugabe said the ZDF also participated in various peacekeeping missions in Angola, Somalia and Rwanda, where they were deployed under the auspices of the United Nations.

Said Cde Mugabe: “They performed exceptionally well in all the three peace-keeping assignments and earned the country well-deserved international recognition and respect.”

The President said it was not a coincidence that the UN requested the country to provide one of its commanders to be the deputy force commander to the United Nations Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM II) and another as the force commander for the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM III).

The ZDF, said Cde Mugabe, also played a crucial role alongside other Southern African Development Community Allied Forces from Angola and Namibia in assisting the government of the Democratic Republic of Congo protect its sovereignty against Rwandan and Ugandan-backed invading rebel forces.

“The timely intervention in the Congo by our forces resulted in the creation of a relatively peaceful environment conducive to the development of a meaningful political process,” said Cde Mugabe.

The President said the Southern Africa region has recently been hit by a number of cyclone-induced floods, which destroyed infrastructure, and the ZDF played an important role in evacuating and feeding the flood victims and providing them with medication.

Cde Mugabe said since independence, ZDF engineers have also been engaged in the removal of anti-personnel landmines that were planted by the Ian Smith regime in its futile attempts to slow down the progress of the liberation war.

About 700 kilometres of Zimbabwe’s borders with Mozambique and Zambia were de-mined, opening up some of the land for infrastructural and other economic development activities.

The President said over 220 kilometres of formerly mine-infested land in the Victoria-Falls to Mlibizi area was now ready to be handed over to the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development and that of Environment and Tourism, following the successful completion of the de-mining project.

“Cognisant of the danger that landmines pose to the population, Government remains committed to their removal. Defence forces will be deployed in the Sango Border Post to Crooks Corner minefield which lies in the heart of our famous Gonarezhou National Park,” said Cde Mugabe.

He said the de-mining of the area would enable the successful and full utilisation of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, a joint tourist venture between Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa.

Turning to staff conditions in the ZDF, Cde Mugabe said Government has always taken broad and effective measures to ensure that morale remains high among the forces.

He said the first of such steps was the abolishment of the racial system, which rewarded whites and blacks differently.

“Today, members of the defence forces are paid according to their ranks and not race. In addition, Government has adopted a policy of constantly reviewing the salaries and allowances of the forces in line with economic trends.”

Cde Mugabe said it was a known fact that the main grievance leading to Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle was that of land which had been occupied by
Cde Mugabe said it was a known fact that the main grievance leading to Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle was that of land which had been occupied by British settlers. But now the majority of Zimbabweans, including ZDF members, were proud occupants of commercial land having benefited from the land resettlement programme, he said.

"I understand that close to 6 000 members of the Defence Forces are still to benefit. The responsible authorities are looking into the matter with a view to allocating land to these remaining deserving cadres," he said.

The President said in pursuing its vast housing programme, Government in May this year, first embarked upon Operation Restore Order to bring order, normalcy and legality in both the business sector and residential areas.

He said that undertaking had now metamorphosed into Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle, in which ZDF engineers were supporting the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development in reconstruction projects.

Cde Mugabe said a total of 600 members of the ZDF have been allocated stands at Whitecliff Farm in Harare, while the remainder would be considered in other areas.

He said increased literacy among the defence forces has been one of the Government's top priorities and that accounted for the establishment of several primary and secondary schools in their cantonment areas.

"These schools have greatly improved the literacy levels of both the members of the defence forces and their dependants.

"From only eight primary schools in 1980, the number has today risen to 12 primary and five secondary schools," he said.

Plans were at an advanced stage, he said, to build an army boarding school in Kadoma to cater for dependants of both serving and retired ZDF members.

President Mugabe said the ZDF continues to introduce educational and professional programmes at its institutions for military and academic excellence.

As a result of the efforts, said Cde Mugabe, 173 officers recently graduated with degrees and diplomas, while another 166 were pursuing various certificate, diploma and degree programmes on a full or part-time basis with different tertiary institutions.

"Apart from attending to their own health programmes, the ZDF have over the years participated in national health promotion initiatives, such as Eyes for Africa (free eye treatment), anti-malaria campaign and HIV/AIDS programmes.

"The forces fully support the Ministry of Health’s National Aids Programme and have established two Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centres in cantonment areas of Bulawayo and Harare, while a third is earmarked for Mutare this year," said Cde Mugabe.

He said the centres have gone a long way in addressing the problem of HIV/AIDS among the defence forces through the introduction of anti-retroviral treatment programmes from which some serving members were benefiting.

Cde Mugabe said Government was purchasing flats while at the same time continuing to build more houses in order to meet its target of accommodating all defence forces in their respective barracks.

The President said the ongoing re-equipment programme to replace damaged, old and obsolete equipment had been negatively affected by the macro-economic challenges facing the country, but Government would continue to allocate significant resources to ensure sustained defence of our hard-won independence, sovereignty and self-determination.

"Transport facilities, which before were sadly lacking, have now significantly improved through the purchase of suitable operational individual and staff vehicles.

"Indeed, the ZDF recently acquired some buses and staff cars which have been beetled up by the acquisition of operational vehicles from China in a deal that demonstrates the success of our Look East Policy," said Cde Mugabe.

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