

ANC-led government sends army to South Africa's townships

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The African National Congress (ANC)-led Government of National Unity (GNU) is deploying 2,200 soldiers across South Africa, targeting working-class townships under the pretext of combating gang violence.

Under the banner of “Operation Prosper,” South African President Cyril Ramaphosa is deploying troops in full combat gear, armed with assault rifles and transported in armoured vehicles and military Samil trucks. Soldiers are equipped with live ammunition, with standing orders to fire in “self-defence”.

These forces are being sent into overwhelmingly working-class and impoverished apartheid-era townships, shaped by the legacy of the Group Areas Act. Areas targeted include Eldorado Park, Westbury, Riverlea, Mitchells Plain, Hanover Park, and the northern parts of Nelson Mandela Bay, spanning the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, North West and Western Cape provinces.

Speaking to Parliament last month, Ramaphosa stated that “We are getting the police and the army to work together to handle the challenges our people are facing.” He justified the deployment of the South African National Defence Force as necessary to complement the South African Police Service in tackling gang violence, extortion syndicates and unregulated mining, and in “bringing stability to our communities.”

An initial force of 550 soldiers was deployed for three months beginning January 30 in parts of Gauteng, including Johannesburg, where a convoy of 25 military vehicles entered the city. This was followed by a far larger contingent of 2,200 troops, deployed from April 1 for a year-long operation across multiple provinces.

Soldiers are also being deployed in regions such as the Far West Rand that have become centres of the country’s “zama-zama” informal mining economy.

For many residents, the sight of soldiers on the streets revives memories of apartheid-era repression, including the brutal suppression of the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and the widespread township revolts of the 1980s under successive states of emergency of the apartheid regime. Entire

generations recall the military’s role in occupying townships, enforcing curfews, and terrorising residents.

The deployment of troops has nothing to do with combating gangs. The growth of crime and violence stems from a deepening social crisis rooted in capitalism and overseen by three decades of ANC rule.

Thirty years ago, Nelson Mandela promised that taking control of the capitalist state and advancing a new black capitalist elite would open the path to widespread prosperity. In his inauguration speech on May 10, 1994, he declared, “Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another.” He proclaimed that “we have, at last, achieved our political emancipation” and pledged to liberate all people from “the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.” He concluded: “Let freedom reign. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement.”

The ANC’s promise has given way to a nightmare for the majority of South Africans.

Two-thirds of the population now live in poverty, and around 10.8 million people cannot afford sufficient food. Approximately 30 percent of workers are unemployed, while youth unemployment stands at around 40 percent. At the same time, the richest 10 percent of the population controls more than 80 percent of the country’s wealth.

Wealth ownership is still overwhelmingly concentrated among the white South African ruling class. However, studies show that inequality within the black African population now accounts for the largest share of total inequality in South Africa. The ANC’s black economic empowerment policies have benefited a thin layer to the point that now more than half of total inequality in South Africa now comes from differences within population groups, particularly within the black African population, rather than between racial groups.

Today, the South African army has become a routine instrument of bourgeois rule, exposing as fiction the ANC’s claim that it transformed the apartheid army for external

defence only. In its 1996 White Paper on Defence, a foundational policy document of the post-apartheid government, the ANC asserted that “the primary function of the SANDF is to defend South Africa against external military aggression.”

Barely a year later, those claims lay in tatters. The SANDF was deployed internally in 1997 under Operation Recoil. This was followed by repeated deployments—Operation Slasher (2001), Operation Combat (2012), and Operation Thunder (2018)—all under the pretext of combating crime.

This reached a new stage with the use of the military to suppress social unrest, including during the 2008 xenophobic violence—after years in which the ANC had allowed such sentiments to fester and actively whipped them up. It continued with Operation Fiela in 2015 under Jacob Zuma, ostensibly launched in response to xenophobic attacks but rapidly expanded into mass raids on working-class communities.

Under Ramaphosa, this tendency has deepened with the large-scale deployment of troops to the Cape Flats in 2019, the unprecedented mobilisation of up to 73,000 soldiers during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, and the deployment of 25,000 troops during the 2021 unrest—the largest such operation since the end of apartheid.

Since 2022, Operation Prosper has also been directed against illegal mining, targeting desperate workers driven into dangerous informal mining by mass unemployment and poverty, most visibly during the Stilfontein siege of late 2024. This campaign culminated the following year with the starvation deaths of more than 100 zama zama miners.

The use of the military to suppress the working class is set to escalate amid the social crisis intensified by the US–Israeli war against Iran. On April 1, petrol increased by R3.06 per litre (approximately \$0.16), while diesel rose by R7.51 (approximately \$0.39). Paraffin—used by the poorest households for cooking and heating—has more than doubled in price, reaching between R30 and R35 per litre (approximately \$1.55 to \$1.80) in informal settlements. Lower-income workers already spend around 40 percent of their wages on transport, and rising fuel costs are cascading through the entire economy.

As the global crisis of capitalism deepens—driven by imperialist war, economic instability and intensifying geopolitical conflict—the ruling class is preparing for dictatorship and war. The US–Israeli war against Iran is a decisive factor in the worsening conditions faced by millions of workers in South Africa and internationally. Through its impact on energy prices, currency instability and global supply chains, it is accelerating inflation, driving down real wages and pushing already impoverished populations to the brink. The ruling elite, integrated into global finance capital,

is imposing the burden of this crisis onto the working class while preparing the armed forces to suppress the inevitable resistance.

All sections of the political establishment are united in their readiness to use force against the working class. The Democratic Alliance, the country’s second largest party, formed by the remnants of the Apartheid white supremacist parties and a key partner in ANC-led government, openly backed the deployment, with its leader John Steenhuisen declaring that “the city and province will welcome the extra resources” provided by the military.

From another faction, Des van Rooyen of the uMkhonto weSizwe (MKP) party criticised the operation only from the standpoint of inadequate funding, warning that “they can’t perfect their deployment” under current defence budget constraints.

Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Julius Malema endorsed the intervention from the start, stating, “We are happy that the army is coming... we are going to restore law and order.”

The working class must draw the necessary political conclusions. The fight against poverty, inequality and repression cannot be waged within the framework of capitalism or through appeals to the existing parties and institutions.

The upcoming International May Day Online Rally 2026 takes on decisive importance. It will bring together workers and youth from across the world to advance a socialist programme against imperialist war, social inequality and authoritarian rule. Workers and young people in South Africa should seize this opportunity: register today, participate in the discussion, and help build a unified international movement against capitalism and war.



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