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### **Zimbabwe Soldiers Dump Arms and Illegally Cross into South Africa**

BULAWAYO — Forty-five Zimbabwean soldiers sent to patrol the frontier with South Africa two weeks ago deserted and skipped the border to seek a better life in the country's more prosperous neighbour, according to ZimOnline.

The deserters were part of a larger group of a group of 63 soldiers from the army's 3 Brigade deployed on January 1 at Beitbridge town on the border with South Africa. They were to patrol along the border that is notorious for rampant smuggling and other criminal activity.

But they never lasted two days on duty, dumping their weapons in the thick bush along the border and changing into civilian clothes before crossing the crocodile-infested Limpopo River—separating the two countries—to enter South Africa, said our sources, who are senior officers in the army.

“The deserters told their colleagues who remained behind that they were going to South Africa because they could not continue in the army, working for peanuts,” said an officer, who is based at Imbizo Barracks near Zimbabwe's second largest city of Bulawayo.

“They all left their guns and uniforms, which have all since been brought back to barracks,” added the army officer, whose name and rank we are withholding because he was speaking without permission from his superiors.

According to the officer, senior commanders had ordered a total media blackout on the issue, which they feared could possibly cause similar desertions by junior soldiers who are unhappy over their poor salaries.

Defence Minister Sydney Sekeramayi refused to take questions on the matter. “Leave me alone. I do not know what you are talking about,” was all Sekeramayi would say before switching off his mobile phone.

The sources said a taskforce comprising army and police investigators as well as the spy Central Intelligence Organisation had been set up to track down the deserters and was expected to go to South Africa to search for the runaway soldiers.

“We have also alerted our South African colleagues to be on guard and arrest those deserters,” said an officer in the police's paramilitary Support Unit that is also involved in the hunt for deserters.

Hundreds of junior soldiers and police have resigned or deserted over the past few years disgruntled by poor pay and working conditions. Many have ended up in neighbouring countries especially in Botswana and South Africa working as private security guards.

The lowest paid junior officer in the army and police earns about Z\$75 000 per month, an amount that is way below the Z\$460 000 that the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe says a family of five needs per month to survive.

An estimated three million Zimbabweans or about a quarter of the country's 12 million people live in neighbouring countries and in Britain and America and other Western nations after fleeing home because of worsening hunger and economic hardships.

Zimbabwe is in the grip of its worst ever economic crisis that has seen inflation shooting beyond 1 000 percent and spawned severe shortages of food, fuel, electricity, essential medicines, hard cash and just about every basic survival commodity.

Political analysts rule out the possibility of well-paid top army generals staging a coup against President Robert Mugabe. But they have always speculated that worsening hunger could at some point force the underpaid ordinary trooper to either openly revolt or to simply refuse to defend the government should Zimbabweans rise up in a civil rebellion.

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