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HIV and Aids in South Africa's army as seen by Graeme Hosken

The launch of Project Phidisa is set to halt the decimation of South Africa's Defence Force as the HIV and Aids pandemic rages out of control among the country's armed forces.

At least one in five of the 70 000 SANDF members are currently infected with the incurable disease, with medical experts predicting the infection rate in the defence force will sky-rocket over the next few years.

The department of defence, together with the United States National Institute of Health, on Tuesday launched Project Phidisa, a national campaign aimed at reducing the HIV and Aids infection rate among SANDF members.

The five-year project, in which clinical research will be conducted at six centres around South Africa, is aimed at developing the most appropriate plan of action on how anti-retrovirals and non anti-retroviral drugs can be administered to SANDF members and their families who volunteer for the project.

At least one in five of the 70 000 SANDF members are infected The centres, said Phidisa communications officer Lieutenant Sheila Senokwanyane, would be in Pretoria, Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Umtata, Phalaborwa and Mathubathuba at the various SANDF medical facilities.

She said the project was in line with the government's HIV and Aids campaign and would conduct research into the disease and other related illnesses.

Speaking at the launch of Phidisa, Deputy Defence Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge said South Africa needed to have a fighting-fit defence force.

"It is therefore imperative that we do everything in our power to ensure that our soldiers are healthy and that we show them that we have not given up on them," she said.

Major-General Mokhethi Radebe, military health force preparation chief director, confirmed that 23 percent of the SANDF was suspected of being HIV-positive.

"South Africa needed to have a fighting-fit defence force" He could not give the exact infection rate figure as HIV and Aids testing was done on a purely voluntary basis.

Commenting on the HIV and Aids status of SANDF members deployed in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Radebe said that before members were sent on missions outside South Africa's borders, soldiers were given a comprehensive health assessment which included an HIV and Aids test.

"If members are found to be HIV-positive they are not allowed to go on missions of deployment outside of the country."

"They can, however, be deployed within the country depending on their health status," he said.

Radebe said a project like this was of great importance to the SANDF as it could define what particular treatment could be given to someone who tested HIV-positive.

"The objectives of this project are to see that proper clinical research structures, within the South African Military Health Services, are developed so that critically important research on other diseases, as well as HIV and Aids, can be conducted.

"Another aim of the project is to answer research questions relevant to South Africa and its population which we believe is reflected in the military."

"Therefore, the answers gained from this project will have relevance to the general population of the country," said Radebe.

Lieutenant-General Rinus Jansen van Rensburg, SANDF Surgeon-General, said the project would provide vital research into anti-retroviral and non anti-retroviral drugs, as well as a scientific research basis allowing better informed decisions to be made in supporting SANDF soldiers and their families who are HIV-positive.

Henry Masur, of the United States National Institute of Health, said they became involved in the project because of the global health problem created by HIV and Aids within defence forces.

"We are also interested, from a humanitarian position, in finding and establishing research facilities so that data on the disease can be gathered.

"Our medical and research experts will be working closely with their South African counterparts on the project and will provide information gathered from similar projects into HIV and Aids in the US defence force to your country's researchers," he said.