



**MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

MINISTER OF DEFENCE

M.G.P. LEKOTA

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE,
HONOURABLE MOSIUOA LEKOTA, ON THE OCCASION**

OF

THE CEREMONIAL COMMISSIONING OF THE GRIPEN

ADVANCED LIGHT FIGHTER FLEET

ON

17 SEPTEMBER 2008

Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers

Honourable Members of Parliament present here

The Premier of the Western Cape, Ms Lynn Browne

The Executive Mayor of the City of Cape Town, Helen Zille

Acting Secretary for Defence

Chief of the South African National Defence Force

Chief of Services and Divisions

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Foreign Delegates

Senior officials

Industry Representative

AAD Exhibitors

Representatives of the media

Visitors to the Africa Aerospace and Defence Show

Ladies and Gentlement

The commissioning of the Gripen fighter aircraft today marks a major milestone in the continuing process of re-equipping and revitalising the South African National Defence Force – a process that started with the conceptualisation of a new defence policy in the White Paper on Defence of 1996 and Defence Review of 1998. From the inception of our democratic South Africa it was envisaged that the Defence Force should be a modern, technologically advanced force. The Gripen – the first truly modern front-line fighter aircraft in South Africa since the acquisition of Mirage fighters in the mid 1970's - is a potent symbol of that aspiration.

The modernisation of our defence force in no way diminishes the commitment to peace and stability and the defensive posture that are cornerstones of our post-1994 defence policy.

South Africa is deeply committed to the promotion of peace, stability, growth, development, democracy and good governance across our continent and globally, as is clearly demonstrated by our involvement in diplomatic initiatives and peace missions in Africa and beyond. In fact, our current level of involvement in peace missions far exceeds the levels originally anticipated.

In addition, South Africa is firmly committed to the promotion of collective security in our region and on the continent as expressed in the African Union Non-Aggression and Mutual Defence Pact and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mutual Defence Pact. We are actively involved in establishing the African Standby Force and the SADC Brigade. These commitments clearly reflect South Africa's conviction that our security is intimately tied to the security of our region and continent.

The constitutional imperative to defend and protect our country and its people does not imply only defence against an overt military threat on our borders. The functions of the defence force detailed in the constitution include compliance with international obligations such as those flowing from our commitment to collective security, which have the ultimate aim of preventing any direct military threat into the future.

Despite the best attempts of the international community to prevent conflict, new points of conflict have emerged and old conflicts have erupted with renewed vigour in some parts of the world, as evidenced by events in the Middle East, South Asia, the Caucasus and in parts of Africa over the past decade.

Previously unanticipated factors such as the global energy crisis and climate change could produce effects that have far-reaching security implications. If anything, we live in an increasingly complex and unpredictable environment. The need for effective defence capabilities is therefore indisputable.

Air power – the ability of a nation to use the air in peace and war and to deny the free use of the air to its enemies – is a key component of modern defence capability. It includes the ability to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance, to provide mobility over long and short distances, to defend against air threats and to deliver firepower against targets on land and at sea.

Where the use of the air is contested, fighter aircraft fulfil a key role in enabling the use of the air by friendly forces and in denying free use to an enemy. In addition they play a vital role in providing support to ground forces and in providing surveillance and reconnaissance capability.

Virtually every aspect of air power and of fighter capability has been demonstrated, even if only to a limited extent, in inter-state conflict, interventions and peace missions in Africa over the last few decades, excluding the liberation wars in Southern Africa. It is therefore a serious error to under-value air power fighter aircraft in African defence planning.

Air power is, however, not an autonomous instrument. Military operations are conducted through the orchestration of air, land and sea capabilities, tailored to the objectives and demands of the specific situation.

Operations are thus almost invariably joint. In addition, operations – particularly peace missions – are almost always conducted by multinational forces and usually involve or interface with the activities of other government and non-state agencies. Air power, including fighter capability, must therefore be prepared for integration in a joint, inter-agency, multi-national context.

The Gripen will be the icon of South Africa's air capability for several decades to come. The possession of these advanced aircraft alone does not, however, impart anything more than a latent capability. The recruitment, training and retention of skilled personnel – pilots, technicians, fighter controllers and a host of others – is critical if that latent capability is to be realised.

A fighter is essentially a weapons platform and is dependant on suitable weapons. Air Force Base Makhado will be the premier fighter base of the South African Air Force and will provide the critical infrastructure for its fighter capability, including the Hawk jet trainers, which will provide the necessary foundation for aspiring fighter pilots.

The air defence sensors and the command and control system of the Air Force, linked to that of the Defence Force, will provide the nerves used to direct and control the muscles. Key technological and support capabilities will be provided from within the Air Force and industry, linked to the capabilities of the suppliers of the aircraft and associated systems.

While this list is not exhaustive, it should be clear that the commissioning of the Gripen implies a great deal more than just the taking into service of an aircraft – it marks the initiation of an entire system.

The realisation that military capability can only be accurately assessed in a full systems context is critically important and invalidates the common tendency to equate equipment numbers with capability. It also explains why the establishment of capabilities in the absence of an immediate threat is important.

While front-line equipment can be bought at short notice in the face of an imminent threat, establishing the system that enables the full exploitation of the capability of such equipment and of the higher-level system into which it must be integrated is another matter.

The perennial dilemma of peace-time defence forces is thus that, almost paradoxically, they must invest in expensive equipment and thorough training precisely when there is no immediate threat and national budgets are directed at other, more immediate needs. In our case this is exacerbated by our current and probably continuing high levels of involvement in peace missions.

Recent history – including that of Africa – has, however shown that military capabilities, including air power, cannot be negated. While fighter capability may not be the most intensively utilised component of overall military capability in Africa, particularly in peace missions, it has found application in various conflicts, interventions and peace missions.

The imperative to defend South Africa and its people and our commitment to collective defence, peace, security and the furtherance of Africa's development make fighter capability a key component of South Africa's defence capability. The Gripen will be a powerful symbol of these national commitments and a provider of vital operational capabilities if these should ever be required.

I thank you.