

## How the Zimbabwe Defence Forces prepared for the 2017 military coup

NewsHawks by Bernard Mpfu

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WHILE Zimbabweans out of euphoria generally supported the military coup that ousted the late president Robert Mugabe and ushered President Emmerson Mnangagwa into power, details of the coup have remained elusive.



*Euphoric Zimbabweans cheer soldiers during the 2017 coup [Photo: Facebook]*

In a bid to fill the information gap, *The NewsHawks* went behind the lines to investigate what actually happened in the run up to the coup.

Investigations showed the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, then led by General Constantino Chiwenga, who is now vice-president and Health minister, bought and refurbished military hardware behind Mugabe's back to execute its mission.

Mnangagwa and Chiwenga – who were the face of the military brinkmanship with Mugabe – were in the loop, working through the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) then commanded by General Philip Valerio Sibanda.

Other generals played critical roles in coordinating the plan, especially Lieutenant-General Sibusiso Moyo, now Foreign Affairs minister, who announced the coup on state television.

Lieutenant-General Engelbert Rugeje, now retired, was also key, together with several commanders who knew Mugabe's day of reckoning was looming.

Documents show that as part of the coup preparations, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) signed a US\$20 million deal with a South Africa military contractor, Boomslang Logistics (Pty) Ltd to refurbish its dilapidated armoured personnel carriers that were to be later rolled out on to the streets to push out Mugabe.

Boomslang is a multifaceted vehicle supplier and logistics provider, specialising in peacekeeping support operations and expeditionary efforts in austere and conflict areas.

The Pretoria-based company also specialises in commercial vehicles for national police, defence forces, and peacekeeping missions.

The ZNA was represented by the MoD, while Boomslang was represented Aadil Ashref Wadvalla.

The deal, which was initiated way back in 2016, almost two years before the coup, initially involved refurbishing 72 Cascavel EE-9 vehicles owned by the ZNA, documents show.

The deal was code-named Project Cascavel EE-9.

A Cascavel is six-wheeled Brazilian-made armoured vehicle developed primarily for reconnaissance. It was engineered by a company called Engesa in 1970 as replacement of M8 Greyhounds.

The armoured car was first fitted with the Greyhound's 37mm main gun and subsequently a French turret adopted from the Panhard AML-90. Later models carry unique Engesa turrets with a Belgian 90mm cockerill Mk.3 cannon produced under licence as the EC-90.

The Zimbabwean army was going to pay US\$249 000 for each Cascavel, meaning with 72 of them involved the price would be US\$17 928 000 (about US\$18 million). On top of that US\$2 million was set aside for spare parts.

As part of the agreement, the two parties also agreed to train 50 military personnel to maintain the refurbished armoured vehicles.

The obligations of the MoD and Boomslang were clearly spelt out.

"Boomslang shall deliver the refurbished Cascavels to MoD during the agreed delivery period, and shall take all reasonable steps to provide services and training which shall be done sufficiently and timeously in order to give effect to the general intent and purpose of this agreement," documents says.

"MoD shall ensure that duty-free certificates are issued for the delivery of the spare parts. All costs related thereto shall be for the account of Boomslang."

The Cascavels were to delivered 18 months from the day of signing of the contract with a grace period of six months. This meant from February 2016, they would have been ready by August 2017, all things being equal, which was three months before the coup.

Before the contract was signed, Boomslang presented a prototype of the Cascavel EE-9 to the MoD and commanders to ensure approval.

As part of the investigation, *The NewsHawks* saw some demo video footage of Cascavels.

To finance the project, it was agreed Boomslang would secure funding and MoD would ensure that the lender would be issued a sovereign guarantee.

“The parties herein pledge their full co-operation and shall use their best endeavours to procure the fulfillment of these conditions by no later 29 February 2016. If all these conditions precedent are not fulfilled by the date specified above or such other agreed fulfillment date, this agreement shall be of no force or effect and neither party shall have any claim against the other party,” the agreement says.

“Should the parties fail to agree upon an arbiter within 14 days after the dispute has been referred to arbitration, then the arbitrator shall be appointed at the request of either party to the dispute by the president for the time of the Law Society of Zimbabwe.”

When *The NewsHawks* reporters – who were then working elsewhere – enquired about this deal after the coup, a dispute had emerged.

Boomslang sales executive Ziyaad Landis then said the company had agreed with the army to refurbish its entire fleet of armoured vehicles, but managed to service only five before it stopped due to payment delays.

“The arrangement was that we were supposed to fix all the Cascavels in Zimbabwe and all military trucks. We had a deal that they would pay us later. We refurbished five trucks and put in up to US\$3 million in Zimbabwe,” Landis said then.

“We invested in Zimbabwe, but we were never paid. We have been trying to engage army officials, but it has been hard to find a way. We told army officials that we put our money where our mouths are and we are also prepared to invest more in Zimbabwe.”

Eugene Chernetsky, Boomslang Research and Development director, said at the time he was optimistic that Mnangagwa’s government would pay.

“The new government is still trying to build the bridges but there is nothing solid at the moment,” Chernetsky said in a telephone interview from Russia at the time.

“We were looking for co-operation with Zimbabwe but unfortunately we failed to find the trustworthy counterpart. We have worked with India, Russia and eastern Europe.”

The army did not respond to questions at the time.

However, a senior MoD official said the army and Boomslang parted ways before all the work was done due to broken trust and then the military hired a local company to finish the job. A Boomslang executive said recently he would comment on the issue when he returns from the United States.

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