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Zondo commission - former bodyguards reveal shady dealings of high profilers

Frequent trips to Saxonwold, money bags in boots of state cars, and death threats. These are some of the shenanigans about which the commission of inquiry into state capture heard on Thursday.

Three in-camera witnesses whose identities have been concealed for their safety, gave explosive testimonies in which they alleged regular visits to the Guptas' Saxonwold, Johannesburg, home by senior government officials and a former cabinet minister, at times to apparently collect cash in large bags.

Among those named are former public enterprises minister Malusi Gigaba; former Eskom executives Brian Molefe, Anoj Singh and Matshela Koko; and former Transnet executives Siyabonga Gama and Garry Pita. Ben Ngubane and Thamsanqa Jiyane, the former chairpersons of the two entities respectively, were also named, as was Linda Mabaso, who also chaired Transnet at a later stage.

Identified as Witnesses One, Two and Three, the men told the commission that they observed these activities as they were the assigned close protection officers or bodyguards to some of those named above. They also drove them around in their state-allocated cars, and in some of these cases were instructed not to log the trips to the Gupta home in their books.

Witness One was Molefe's driver and bodyguard from 2011 to 2014, while he was GCEO of Transnet. He recalled close to 10 trips to the Gupta home between July 2011 and September 2012, while on other occasions Molefe would ask to be taken to the Michelangelo Hotel in Sandton and once to Sahara Computers' offices in Midrand. On all occasions the reason for the trip was to meet Ajay Gupta, but none of the trips were recorded in Molefe's diary. On several occasions, Molefe would carry a light brown backpack with him, which he would take into the house, while Witness One stayed in the car. On his return, the bag would appear to be fuller than before, and it would be placed in the boot of whichever of the four cars used by Molefe for official travel.

"I wouldn't know what the content was, but the bag was filled with something," said Witness One.

On one occasion while in Saxonwold, Witness One also saw Gigaba and his then advisor, Siyabonga Mahlangu.

Witness One further told of one occasion where he found himself on the receiving end of Molefe's wrath. He had tried to warn him of the security risk of carrying large sums of cash, after he found the backpack containing R200 notes in Molefe's office while acting on an instruction to retrieve the GCEO's phone from it. "He was very upset with my comment. He said it was none of my business what was in his bag."

He completed his testimony by telling the commission about threats to his safety that he has received since working with investigators from Fundudzi Forensic Services, which probed procurement deals at both Transnet and Eskom, and later the commission.

The most recent message was received by Witness One in January this year, and read: “We are fully aware that you are about to give evidence at the Zondo commission again, and you have intimidated other CPOs/bodyguards to give testimony as well. We are sorry to inform you that you are being used and you are on your own. If you love your life, I advise you to resign and disappear. We have exposed MNS and Popo is next, and who do you think you are. You are on your own. Stop it with your moronic superman behaviour. We are watching your every move, your conversations. So act sensibly and give this matter your most urgent attention. When we are done with you, your family won’t find a piece of you.”

He told the commission that he also noticed as recently as June that he has been followed around by two vehicles on separate occasions, both grey and white VW Polos with no registration plates.

Witness Two and Three told of similar patterns with their bosses. Witness Two was assigned to Molefe’s successor at Transnet, Siyabonga Gama, while he was still CEO of Transnet Freight Rail, a subsidiary. In his account, plastic packages for Gama, that appeared to contain money, would be collected from Gupta associate Salim Essa at an apartment building in Melrose Arch, while Gama would wait at the nearby African Pride Hotel. On collecting the packages, Witness Two would then collect Gama and follow instructions on where to go next.

On one occasion, after they had made a collection, Gama asked Witness Two to drive him to the home of an associate in Bryanston. After spending some time inside, he came out to the boot which contained the bag from Essa, and started sorting large sums of cash. He gave some to Witness Two, who only realised later that it amounted to R50 000. He estimated the bag to be carrying around R1-million.

On one of the trips with Gama to Saxonwold, Witness Two recalled Jiyane commenting to him outside the house that he was “exposed to the shady stuff that they do”, in isiZulu. By this time, Gama had already been appointed GCEO of Transnet.

A fallout with Gama led to Witness Two being allegedly unfairly dismissed from Transnet in late 2017, after Gama accused him of practising witchcraft at his home. He was later reinstated after an investigation.

Witness Three claimed that he was present when Gigaba would go shopping for tailored suits in Sandton, presumably with cash collected from the Gupta home. On one occasion, he told the commission, Gigaba took money out of a bag in the boot of his car to buy lunch for Witness Three and the colleagues who travelled in the rest of the convoy. There were many R200 and R100 notes in the bag, recalled Witness Three. This happened after they had been to Saxonwold.

He recalled another occasion in July 2014 when, during an executive strategy meeting of Transnet, he had gone to collect Singh, to whom he was then assigned, from the Three Rivers Lodge in the Vaal. While waiting in the car for Singh, he noticed two men who seemed to be Chinese walk from a Hyundai H1 parked nearby, into the venue with large sports bags. Minutes later, he received a text from Singh to come into the venue, and instructed to place one of the bags, which were on the floor, in his car. Singh, who was GCFO of Transnet at the time, was with Molefe, and Witness Three concluded that the other bag was for him.

Singh, according to Witness Three, would usually instruct him to make a stop at Knox Vault, a safe deposit box facility in Houghton, after leaving the Gupta home with a large bag.

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo acknowledged the circumstances under which the three men had to give evidence, and thanked them for their commitment. He assured them that the commission would do its best to ensure their safety.

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