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Zondo Commission – Dirco panic as unsanctioned Waterkloof landing was followed by wayward guests

Jerry Matjila, former director-general for the Department of International Relations (Dirco), has described to the commission of inquiry into state capture the panic within the department after the Gupta family landed a private aircraft at Waterkloof air force base in Pretoria in 2013.

The controversial landing has been the focus of the commission for about a week now, with evidence leaders seeking clarity on what legal mandate may have been breached to authorise the landing, which occurred on a national keypoint.

Matjila said he first learned of the landing in the media, soon after it happened, and immediately called a meeting with Dirco spokesperson Clayton Monyela and then chief of state protocol Bruce Koloane, along with officials from other affected departments, in an effort to understand what had happened. A meeting followed to brief then Dirco minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane on the processes followed – she instructed Matjila to suspend Koloane for his part in the matter.

The extent of the sanction subsequently handed down to Koloane in July 2013 was a two-month suspension with full pay and a final written warning, following a disciplinary process at which he pleaded guilty to contravening departmental policies in his role in the matter.

The incident in question saw about 200 private guests of the Gupta family arrive at the military base on the morning of 30 April 2013 on a Jet Airways flight from India. Waterkloof is the territory of the Department of Defence and Military Veterans and since the passengers on board were not in the country for an official visit – for which Waterkloof is mainly reserved, if the size of aircraft allows – they should have gone to OR Tambo International Airport, asserted Matjila.

After meeting with the government officials, Matjila contacted the then Indian high commissioner Anil Kumar Gupta to ascertain the status of the visit and whether there were any members of the Indian government executive on board. He was told that the most senior government officials on board were state ministers – the equivalent of South Africa’s provincial MECs. For this reason, Dirco did not have to concern itself with processes usually reserved for state visits. However, Matjila needed to correct the situation, as the panic was caused by the fact that the aircraft landed at a military facility.

“If this was a real wedding party, it would have landed at a civilian airport... but once you go to a military base, the civilian part goes away, because now you’re coming to a very exclusive area... so you need to provide documentation to say why you have come to this area in this way.”

On this basis, there was no need for Dirco to implement processes usually reserved for visits by executives, and it was agreed that the aircraft – which would wait while its passengers were in Sun City for the four-day wedding of Vela Gupta – was to move to OR Tambo.

At the base, officials of the Department of Home Affairs had verified the travel documents of the passengers, as per requirement for people traveling from outside the country. Dirco officials were thus able to use information provided by Home Affairs to identify the individuals on the flight.

“We agreed that on the 2nd [of May] the aircraft must go to ORTIA and everybody must leave from there, but then we got a reconciliation from Home Affairs that some people, the state ministers, are missing,” said Matjila. “I said to the high commissioner ‘where are these people’ and he said they chartered a private aircraft to Cape Town... after enjoying Sun City.”

This caused more panic for Matjila and his team, who now had the burden of finding out where the officials were. They subsequently learned that besides those who had gone to Cape Town, there were others who had gone to the Free State. “Even if you’re a state minister, if something happens in Cape Town, we may be blamed as South Africa,” he said.

The delegation that had gone to Cape Town did not return to India on the Jet Airways flight, but instead took an Emirates flight via Dubai to India. One or some of the state ministers also visited the Free State.

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