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Zondo Commission – Gupta wedding flight opened Vrede dairy can of worms

The Vrede dairy farm project was again the topic under discussion at the commission of inquiry into state capture as former head of the Free State Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Peter Thabethe, made a return to the stand. Thabethe's first round of testimony had to be adjourned after his legal team allegedly ditched him. He came back to give evidence about his role in the controversial dairy farm project.

Over R200-million in taxpayers' money was channelled into the project that was promoted by the Free State government as a tool to benefit black emerging farmers.

Thabethe told the commission on Thursday that the Vrede dairy farm project did not fail because of poor management but the problem started when the Gupta wedding flight landed at Pretoria's Waterkloof airbase; that matter, Thabethe said, opened many investigations. He also maintained the point he made in his first stint at the commission that the Indian company Paras was the strategic partner, not Estina.

Thabethe alleged that Mosebenzi Zwane was the one who requested the release of the funds for the project from National Treasury. He further claimed that every agreement he signed on behalf of the department for the project was done with the necessary approval from the executive council and the MEC.

Before the implementation process of the project, Thabethe went to India to observe the operations of similar projects with Paras. He also mentioned that Zwane suggested that a Mr Ashok Narayana should accompany him as he did not want to disappoint the government officials in India. The protocol officer was not important to Thabethe for his trip to India as he only needed someone to interpret for him.

Thabethe had struggled to answer questions posed to him by the commission. He was asked how Estina, the Gupta-linked company, was chosen as a local partner for the Vrede project even though they did not have enough experience in dairy farming. Thabethe answered that only the company's registration and tax compliance were checked; he further said those were the only information needed before going forward with the deal.

Thabethe will continue his testimony on Friday.

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