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Zondo Commission – wheeling and dealing for Gupta Waterkloof landing clearance

Major Thabo Ntshisi, the Department of Defence (DoD) official who cleared the private flight from India in April 2013 that landed at the Waterkloof air force base with guests of the Gupta family, denies that he acted under duress from Bruce Koloane to do so, despite the former chief of state protocol having not supplied the requisite paperwork for such a request.

Ntshisi also denied that he undertook to clear the flight for landing, with the vision of getting Koloane to return the favour later. But audio recordings of telephonic conversations in which he participated contradict this.

Ntshisi approved the critical flight clearance that allowed the Jet Airways aircraft carrying over 200 Gupta guests, who arrived in the country on 30 April for a wedding at Sun City. He returned to the witness chair at the commission of inquiry into state capture on Thursday, following a directive from chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo.

Ntshisi was to clarify circumstances around the recordings, of conversations between him and Koloane, now South Africa's ambassador to the Netherlands, and again between Ntshisi and defence department colleague Lieutenant-Colonel Christine Anderson, who was based at Waterkloof at the time. A third conversation of interest was between Ntshisi and a personal acquaintance identified only as Sarah.

At the time of his first appearance earlier in the month, the commission had not yet received the recordings.

In the first, Ntshisi takes a call from Koloane, who tells him he is following up on a request by the "Indians" for a clearance. Ntshisi can be heard advising Koloane that he cannot issue a flight clearance without a written request, on the basis that Waterkloof only receives heads of state or their deputies, and his understanding is that the flight in question was for private visitors. Koloane assures him that there will be ministers on board and that the ministers of transport and defence, Ben Martins and Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, respectively, are privy to the details, with the latter having no objection. Koloane admitted to the commission this week that he lied about the ministers, as neither of them knew of his plans.

Ntshisi insists in the recording that Waterkloof will definitely want the request in written form, to which Koloane says the details of his request are such that they cannot be put in writing, before asking who is in charge of Waterkloof. "This is a unique case, that's why I'm calling you," Koloane says to Ntshisi, who then commits to enquiring with Anderson if she approves. Koloane tells him that she may already be privy to the arrangements as "these people" had already been to meet her at the air force base. By these people, Koloane presumably refers to the Guptas, whose name he mentions several times in the conversation.

In another recording, Ntshisi speaks to Anderson, who tells him to go ahead and clear the flight as this is "political" as "our number one knows about this." Anderson said if Koloane's Department of

International Relations (Dirco) approves of the landing, then he can approve. Ntshisi confirms that Koloane also told him of number one's knowledge of the matter. By number one, the two are referring to former president Jacob Zuma, whose name Koloane also admitted in his testimony to having dropped in order to impress the Indian high commissioner to South Africa, Anil Kumar Gupta. Koloane said it was the high commissioner who, suspecting that there was a delay in the request that he had sent, prompted his enquiry with Ntshisi.

Like Koloane, Ntshisi told the commission that there was nothing in it for him, when he authorised the landing despite not receiving a *note verbale*, Dirco's official form of request to his office.

Evidence leader Advocate Baitse Ratanga challenged Ntshisi on the basis of his conversation with Sarah, in which he can be heard asking her to facilitate a connection between a person he described as a senior official of government, to put in a good word with Koloane. This, Ntshisi said, was because he was on a quest to secure a job at Dirco.

Ratanga's query concerns a "favour" that Ntshisi mentions as having just done in relation to a flight clearance for a flight from India, for Koloane. On the basis of this favour, Ntshisi urges Sarah to claim him as her brother to this unidentified individual, and make sure he mentions his name when engaging Koloane, as well as the flight clearance he had just given at Koloane's prompting.

Further on in the conversation, Ntshisi can be heard telling Sarah that "we need to use these people when we get an opportunity", and also that Koloane is the "key" into Dirco, as he is the director-general (DG). Ntshisi had the wrong impression, however, as the DG was actually Jerry Matjila.

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