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Zondo Commission – Guptas defied govt resistance to special aircraft landing arrangements

The 2013 landing of a private plane by the Gupta family at the Waterkloof air force base in Pretoria was again the focus of the commission of inquiry into state capture on Wednesday. The inquiry heard how former chief of state protocol and now ambassador to the Netherlands, Bruce Koloane, abused the names of former president Jacob Zuma, as well as ministers Ben Martins and Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, to approve the landing.

Martins was transport minister at the time, while Mapisa-Nqakula was minister of defence, a post she still holds.

Former director-general (DG) of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, Nonkululeko Sindane, told the inquiry that Koloane was told by Mapisa-Nqakula's DG Michael Ramagoma that the minister was not interested in anything to do with the matter. Despite this, Koloane used her name to advance favours for the controversial business family.

When an investigation involving DGs of the affected departments was started, it was found that Zuma was unavailable for an interview, despite several references in communication between officials at the forefront, to "Number One." Although the family of three brothers is known to be close to Zuma, Martins told the commission on Tuesday there had been no instruction from the former president to permit the family to land their guests' plane as and where they did.

"I think the president was not around at that time, I can't remember the exact details, but what I do remember is that the DG was fully aware of the issues and he made himself available to respond to the issues and he then gave us a written statement," said Sindane. The DG in the presidency at the time was Cassius Lubisi.

Sindane described the incident as "embarrassing" and said it should never have happened. If it had not been made known by the press, she added, it would have been swept under the carpet. Koloane gave the impression that he was connected to influential cabinet members who could make the landing – requested early in 2013 – happen without trouble. He took the blame for the incident soon after it happened.

Martins testified that the initial request by Rajesh Tony Gupta came in February, and was for the family to be allowed to host a welcoming party for guests arriving from India for the April wedding of his niece Vela, at the Sun City resort. This was to happen at OR Tambo International Airport, the busiest on the continent. When Martins refused permission, and after then CEO of Airports Company of South Africa Bongani Maseko advised Gupta to try Pilanesberg airport, they assumed he had let go of the matter.

What eventually happened, however, was that the flight in question and about 200 passengers arrived at Waterkloof without a valid permit to do so, on a Jet Airways plane. Sindane told the inquiry that innocent civil servants were used to follow through with the landing. It was not only the aircraft that landed, but several helicopters that were allowed to use the base as well.

Going through the approval processes, she explained, her team found no evidence of any ministers having approved either the landing or the use of helicopters on the base.

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