



2 July 2019

Zondo Commission – Guptas pushed for permission to hold a party on ORTIA tarmac

Tony Gupta wanted government to allow his family to hold a welcome party on the tarmac of OR Tambo International Airport in 2013, most likely to prove his influence and importance to guests from India who were coming to a family wedding.

This is the evidence of former minister of transport Ben Martins before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Tuesday. Gupta approached Martins for permission, after first having approached the Airports Company of South Africa (Acsa). Then Acsa acting CEO Bongani Maseko called Martins – who held the transport minister post from June 2012 to June 2013 – around February of that year.

A meeting was then arranged for Gupta to officially ask for permission for a welcome ceremony at the airport – the busiest in Africa – to be held for about 200 guests who were arriving on 30 April 2013 for the four-day wedding of Vela Gupta at Sun City resort in the North West. The meeting, at which Martins, Maseko and then chief of state protocol Bruce Koloane were also present, took place at OR Tambo. Koloane would later be generally perceived to have been the “fall guy” for the debacle, and was appointed as ambassador to the Netherlands.

"I explained that because OR Tambo is such a busy airport, it would not be possible and it would not be feasible to have a welcoming reception," Martins told the inquiry. Maseko further explained to Gupta that the area in question, where aircraft land, is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Home Affairs and not Acsa, as it involves matters relating to travel documents.

"My decision was that we could not grant that permission. I did not have the authority to do so because the authority governing there is the Department of Home Affairs," Martins said.

Gupta's response to the snub, however, was that Martins was denying former president Jacob Zuma's guests their ceremony. His motivation for the request was that some of the guests were ministers from India, who were travelling with the intention to visit Zuma.

When asked by commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo what reasons Gupta gave for wanting the special ceremony, Martins said: "The intention for the event would be to show the importance of the visitors arriving, and the power and influence of the people receiving them, that is what I assumed."

Because Gupta persisted, Maseko advised that he attempt getting permission to land at Pilanesberg airport, which is close to Sun City. Pilanesburg is under the jurisdiction of the North West provincial government.

Two months later, the Jet Airways aircraft in which the guests were travelling landed at the Waterkloof air force base in Pretoria. The department with authority over the base is the Department of Defence and Military Veterans, which was at the time under Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula.

The next time Martins heard of the matter, it was through a call from an official at the Air Traffic Navigation Services (ATNS), informing him of the landing that had occurred without due protocol being followed. "No one

approached me on the Waterkloof landing issue. The first time I was aware of the Waterkloof landing was when an ATNS official called me to say the plane had entered SA air space without a requisite permit," Martins told the commission.

The former minister then ordered that a fine – which was calculated by ATNS and enforced at R80 000 – be imposed on the operator of the flight, as is the standard.

Asked if he had been invited to the wedding, Martins said he had, but had not gone for two reasons – he had a family engagement around the same time, and the security cluster committee of ministers had advised against ministers attending.

Responding to another question from evidence leader advocate Thandi Norman if he had met Gupta before receiving the OR Tambo request, Martins related that soon after he had been appointed transport minister Gupta had approached him with a query related to the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa). Gupta's issue was in line with protocols around a locomotives tender that Prasa had advertised, which Martins felt had already "run its course", but he facilitated a meeting between Gupta and Lucky Montana, then Prasa CEO. The meeting, said Martins, was purely to give Gupta a chance to meet with Montana to gain an understanding of the criteria, and not to put Montana under pressure to advance the Gupta family's chances with the tender.

The meeting with Montana and Gupta came under the spotlight during the parliamentary enquiry into the running of Eskom last year.

"The public image of the Gupta family that we have today in 2019 did not exist [back at the time of the Prasa meeting]. All I knew then was that they were an Indian family who owned a medium-sized BEE company of moderate means, named Sahara."

Useful links:

[Zondo Commission website](#)

Corruption Watch's [Zondo Commission update page](#)

[OR Tambo International Airport](#)