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Zondo Commission – Hlongwane hazy on details of Saxonwold meeting with Jonas and D. Zuma

Fana Hlongwane remembers a lot about a meeting arranged by Duduzane Zuma in which former deputy finance minister Mcebisi Jonas was also present in October 2015, but not the core subject of the trio's discussion. This despite the fact that the meeting was meant as a platform for him and Jonas to iron out issues that had surfaced, with Zuma being the conduit. He confirmed, however, that the three of them met at the Guptas' Saxonwold home, as it was also a familiar place for Zuma, who often worked from the premises.

Hlongwane appeared before the commission of inquiry into state capture on Wednesday, and confirmed Zuma's version of events with regard to the meeting. His statement, like that of Zuma, contradicts the version of Jonas, who claimed that it was not only the three of them, but Ajay Gupta was also present.

According to Jonas he was invited to the meeting by Zuma, who moved it from the initially agreed-upon venue of the Hyatt hotel in Rosebank, to Saxonwold, on 23 October. Once at the residence, Gupta offered him a bribe and promotion to the post of minister, said Jonas. He placed both Zuma and Hlongwane at the venue, but in his version said the pair contributed nothing, even when he retaliated against Gupta and their interaction almost became physical.

Like Zuma, Hlongwane maintains that the three met, without Gupta, to discuss the matter of rumours that Zuma had told him had surfaced about him in business circles. The rumours claimed that Jonas was accusing Hlongwane of blackmailing him. What the blackmailing involved, however, has to date been shared by neither Hlongwane nor Zuma. All Hlongwane could say was that he remembered the broad situation at the time. "I am not able to say there are any other details I remember."

Because the rumours had been shared with him on several occasions by Zuma, Hlongwane said he asked him to arrange a meeting with Jonas so that the two could get to the bottom of the issue. Hlongwane told the commission that he had known Jonas for many years, and considered him a close friend and comrade, so it was important to him that the two of them iron out any differences.

Although their engagement was short, he added, there was noticeable tension at the end, after Jonas denied the rumours, to the extent that it stained his relationship with Jonas. Hlongwane told the commission that he was not satisfied with Jonas's response, but decided not to pursue the matter, with the hope that there would later be a resolution. He was surprised when later he learned that Jonas had taken the matter of their issue to the ANC and was engaged by members of the party, but the same courtesy was not extended to him.

On his relationship with Jonas prior to and after the meeting, Hlongwane said while the pair had had frequent interactions over time prior to the fateful meeting, they now hardly saw each other, and only exchange greetings when they do.

Recalling Jonas's earlier evidence that after leaving Saxonwold he went straight to the airport to catch a flight to the Eastern Cape and once there called Hlongwane to express his disgust at what had happened, commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo noted that Zuma's version is that the meeting had ended on a positive note, not consistent with the disgust that Jonas expressed.

"I myself found a certain number of things strange, the disgust you talk of, the surprise, the shock, I'm not aware of..." said Hlongwane. "At the time I did not see evidence of disgust or shock."

Zondo further noted that he found it strange that the meeting, convened with the sole purpose of finding common ground between old friends, could end without the actual rumours being interrogated. "Since that meeting took place, I also heard rumours months after that there seems to be things that Mr Jonas is saying... again it bothered me, again rumours. Nothing was said to me... ultimately these rumours emerged, as I'm hoping this too will emerge."

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