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Zondo Commission – SA Express money allegedly financed ANC political activities

Senior provincial and national politicians have been named at the commission of inquiry into state capture as alleged beneficiaries of an elaborate scheme to move money from local carrier SA Express (SAX) to the ruling party's coffers. Furthermore, the ANC tried to stop an investigation into the scheme, according to South African Airways security manager Timothy Ngwenya.

The focus of the inquiry on Wednesday was a contract for handling services on behalf of SAX at Mahikeng and Pilanesberg airports. Ngwenya's connection to the case started in June 2016 when he was first contacted by Babadi Tlatsana, the owner of Koreneka, a handling company that had until then been contracted to SAX for handling services at the two airports. She wanted to report a case of corruption against SAX general manager for commercial Brian van Wyk, whom she accused of having taken over her company, and looting SAX in its name. Ngwenya drove from Gauteng to Mahikeng to meet with Tlatsana the next day, who provided documents to support her allegations.

Among these were audio recordings, one of which was made by Tlatsana during a meeting between herself and Van Wyk, in which he allegedly named several prominent ANC politicians who were to benefit from the deal. On the recording, Van Wyk tells Tlatsana that his part in the deal was on instruction from his then CEO, Anathi Ntshanga, and SAX board chair George Mutema. He further names, and according to Tlatsana, scribbles names of the said politicians as well as amounts that would be paid to them. Former North West premier and ANC chairperson Supra Mahumapelo is among them, as are former ministers Dipuo Peters and Lynne Brown.

Van Wyk and Tlatsana connected originally through the provincial transport department, where she had given a proposal to help revive the ground logistics component of the two airports. The department then linked her to Van Wyk, as the two entities were in the midst of embarking on a multi-million-rand project related to the business of the airports. Tlatsana submitted all documents profiling her project idea and her company, and trouble started when she was told by Van Wyk that as a black woman she stood a good chance of benefiting from the project, but her sole ownership status was the only disadvantage, as it limited Koreneka's empowerment prospects.

On this basis, Koreneka would later add more people to the business, one of whom was Nothando Dube, who was allegedly imposed on Tlatsana by Van Wyk, as manager. Thus began, according to Ngwenya, the capture of SAX through a legitimate company. Tlatsana told him that invoices detailing amounts up to R51-million – of which R31-million was paid from SAX and R20-million from the department – were prepared over time, without her knowledge or input to both entities. "She told me that she did not really submit anything, although the money went into her account," said Ngwenya. Tlatsana suspected that Dube was the facilitator of the scheme.

As time went on, friction developed between Tlatsana and Dube, and the latter was dismissed as a result. After leaving Koreneka, Dube formed another company to do the same business for SAX as Koreneka had, and thus replaced Tlatsana's company as service provider, with the help of Van Wyk.

Ngwenya escalated the matter to his seniors within SAX, including Ntshanga. Months later he received a phone call from a man claiming to represent Luthuli House, the ANC's headquarters, who offered him a R3-million bribe to make the case go away.

"Chief, I'm from Luthuli House and I've been given a mandate to talk to you pertaining to your investigation in the North West," the man said to Ngwenya. "He said, 'Listen, the money that was moved out of the North West was meant to finance the political activities of the ANC'.

"I told him I am not a politician, this had nothing to do with me."

Ngwenya refused and told the caller that he did not get involved in politics, at which point the offer was upped to R20-million.

The commission continues to hear more evidence related to the deal.

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