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### **Zondo Commission – Koloane on Gupta Waterkloof landing: “I abused the power of my office”**

Six years after the Gupta plane landing saga at Waterkloof air force base in Pretoria, South Africa’s ambassador to the Netherlands, Bruce Koloane, has admitted to name dropping, using the names of former president Jacob Zuma and two of his cabinet ministers to expedite the flight clearance process for the aircraft carrying the Gupta family's wedding guests.

Koloane was the chief of state protocol at the time, within the Department of International Relations (Dirco). He told the commission of inquiry into state capture on Tuesday that he abused his office and power to exert pressure on Department of Defence (DoD) officials to expedite flight clearance processes, following a request from the then high commissioner to India, Anil Kumar Gupta.

“I would like to admit that I did what has now become popularly known as name dropping, merely to push officials who were supposed to process the flight clearance to do their job,” he said. Under normal circumstances, Dirco would not have become involved in the matter, as Waterkloof falls under the jurisdiction of the DoD. But a call from the high commissioner, who is alleged by Koloane to have told him of a delay in the processing of his request for clearance, was what prompted the latter's actions.

On his first day of evidence on Monday, Koloane had told the inquiry that he did not recall if he had included the names of Zuma, then transport minister Ben Martins and defence minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula in telephonic conversations with DoD officials, one of whom was then warrant officer Thabo Ntshisi. Ntshisi, who was at a defence department command post in Pretoria, was tasked with processing the flight clearance for the Jet Airways plane to land at Waterkloof. He testified last week that Koloane asked him this directly.

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo ruled on Monday that because the audio recordings in question had not been submitted as evidence at the time of the commencement of Koloane’s testimony, nor had he been given copies to listen to, it would only be fair for him to do so overnight and come back on Tuesday morning, having satisfied himself with their content. Koloane started off his testimony by clarifying a few points from Monday’s testimony, declaring that he had erred in saying that he had not recalled the name dropping.

Both Zondo and evidence leader Advocate Thandi Norman challenged Koloane on his lack of memory, citing the magnitude and seriousness of the breach of protocol brought about by his actions. Zondo put to Koloane that the name dropping had been a part of his charge sheet relating to a disciplinary process within Dirco, after which he was suspended. It has also been the subject of significant media attention. To this Koloane replied that he had tried by all means to block out the details of the event as it had had a negative impact on him and his family, to the extent that they required therapy, hence he could not recollect.

Asked by Zondo what was in it for him, Koloane said he did not anticipate to gain anything from his actions, and was merely acting in the best interest of maintaining cordial bilateral relations with India. By his own admission, Dirco has dedicated deputy directors-general for the smooth liaison with countries in each of the major regions of the world, but Koloane found it necessary to act when requested by Gupta to check on a possible delay in the DoD application.

Evidence leader Thandi Norman asked if he expected his intervention to yield positive results, by using the names of members of the executive, to which Koloane said he wanted to impress the high commissioner. “I wanted to be seen to be a man who could get things done.

“I felt it was mere incompetence on the part of the officials and I wanted to push them to act. I was pushing so that they would process the application, but I was hopeful that it would be granted as it had been granted a few months earlier for a state visit.”

Soon after the incident, Koloane was found guilty by an investigative process of the crime prevention and security cluster, whose directors-general developed a report citing serious defence protocol breach by the ambassador.

In an audio recording of the conversation, Koloane can be heard asking Ntshisi if he was aware of the request for the landing of the Indian party, to which Ntshisi answers in the affirmative and asks the ambassador to put a formal request in writing. At this point Koloane tells Ntshisi that the details of the request are of a nature that he cannot put in writing. He asks who is in charge of Waterkloof. After a follow-up conversation with Colonel Christine Anderson, who was based at Waterkloof, Koloane appears to have made some progress, as in another recorded conversation between Ntshisi and Anderson – where he is double checking if she approves – Anderson tells the warrant officer that the matter is “political” and thus they have to approve.

“Did you abuse diplomatic channels in order to facilitate the clearance for this flight?” asked Zondo.

“Chair, I actually abused the power of my office in facilitating this, calling the officials who are processing, exerting pressure on them, but at no stage did I have control over diplomatic channels,” Koloane replied.

“It’s clear abuse of my portfolio as chief of protocol to have put pressure on the officials, in this case Ntshisi, to expedite the processing of the flight clearance, particularly when I had not myself verified whether all the particular requirements had been met.

“I used my office to follow up on why the flight clearance was not processed.”

On 30 April, the day of the landing, Koloane was called by the high commissioner and went to Waterkloof to meet the guests. Although he was invited to the wedding, which took place over that weekend at the Sun City resort, he told the inquiry that he did not attend.

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