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Zondo commission – Guptas didn't pay for my Dubai holiday, Koko tells Zondo

Former acting Eskom GCEO Matshela Koko has denied that the Guptas paid for part of a holiday that he took with his family between December 2015 and January 2016. He appeared before the state capture commission on Monday evening.

Koko said bookings for a holiday originally including Thailand and Qatar were made in November 2015, and fully paid for, for himself, his wife and their children. It was only when the family changed its mind about Doha, Qatar – opting instead to proceed to Dubai after Thailand – that they encountered challenges with visas. They alerted their travel agency Thompsons of the change, even making the necessary extra payment that brought their costs to around R383 000.

When the visa challenge appeared to take longer to sort out, Koko sought help from colleague Suzanne Daniels. According to him, Daniels had experience in handling many travel queries on behalf of Eskom executives, and he trusted that she could expedite the matter in time for the expected travel in late December.

It was only when Eskom began investigating Koko's alleged links to the Guptas that he discovered for the first time that instead of reverting to Thompsons with the cleared visa matter, Daniels had sought help from Travel Excellence, which the Guptas often used. He was shown for the first time evidence of Gupta associates Ashu Chawla and Salim Essa being involved in the arrangements, to the extent that on Travel Excellence's records, it was Essa who paid in cash for Koko's change in travel plans.

Koko queried the affidavits of two Travel Excellence staffers who are expected to give evidence on Tuesday, wherein they confirm that the Kokos' flight arrangements from Thailand to Dubai, and the family's stay at the city's The Oberoi Hotel, was indeed paid for by Essa through Chawla's arrangement. He told the commission that he did not know the two staffers, and had never had any interactions with them, and had therefore reason to doubt the bona fides of their affidavits.

As for the need to go to Daniels, as opposed to sorting out his own visa challenges, Koko said, this was because he trusted her.

"Chair, remember, this is a trip that I paid for fully, and there was a problem only with the visa. My experience with her was that those types of problems she would easily dispose of, and quickly. That's the only reason I went to her," he said of Daniels.

In e-mails between the travel agents and Essa and Chawla, it appears confirmation of Koko's details is sought from Essa, who writes back to confirm how and when payment will be made by his driver, while Chawla – then CEO of Sahara Computers – appears to have been the one to approach Travel Excellence. Koko said while Thompsons was paid for the altered leg of the trip, the company never alerted him that someone else paid for it. He also never sought repayment for that expense.

The Koko family arrived in Dubai on 5 January 2016, having been in Thailand since late December. Evidence leader Advocate Pule Seleka indicated that several other executives of state owned enterprises appeared to have been at the Oberoi around the same time, namely Transnet's Siyabonga Gama and then Denel chairperson Daniel Mantsha.

To defend his assertion that he paid for his Oberoi stay, Koko submitted two invoices that, he said, verify that he was indeed the person billed for the one-night stay, and not Sahara. On the basis of the invoice, he argued, it was clear that the Oberoi was under the same impression that he had had for years. The invoice in the commission's possession showed what appeared to be a collective billing to Sahara of the stay by Koko, Gama and Mantsha, with reference to Sahara as the payer. Like Koko, Gama too sought to obtain an invoice from the hotel, which he has since submitted to the commission as proof that he paid for his own stay. His explanation was that he went to Dubai to meet with Essa, on his way from a business engagement.

Commission chairperson Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo asked Koko why people associated with Essa and Sahara, like Travel Excellence, were so busy making bookings for his travels in circumstances where he says he didn't know them and had nothing to do with them.

"There is one picture that emerges," Zondo added.

"I agree. But there's one step further. I have made submissions to you that at all material times, I know who paid for my travels. At no material times is there ambiguity, I've given you proof."

Zondo's next question probed why Daniels would go out of her way to make arrangements on behalf of Koko that involved Essa and Chawla committing to picking up his travel expenses, when all she was asked to do was sort out visa glitches.

"One of the things you must look at is a document that I got from your legal team, and I've come to accept that some documents are made available to me by your legal team and investigators, but you never come to see them.

"I need you to go and read the judgment that is written by Mr Cassim, a colleague of Mr Seleka, about Ms Daniels. Once you read that judgment, you will get a picture of who Ms Daniels is ... and once you look at this evidence, you will not take long to realise who Ms Daniels was doing the bidding for."

Zondo did not let up. He quizzed Koko on his relationship with Daniels, referring him to previous evidence he gave that the two of them had been close, but their friendship soured at some point.

"During the time of your travels, your relationship was still good. So what was her motive?" Zondo asked.

"My proposition is it was easier for her to deal with her friends to sort out my problem, and that is why, when I asked her post facto, she said it was convenience."

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