



18 May 2021

Zondo commission – Trips by govt execs paid for by Guptas

Neither Anoj Singh nor Matshela Koko paid for their trips to Dubai, arranged by Lenasia travel agency, Travel Excellence, in 2014 and 2016 respectively. They were charged to and paid for by Gupta associate Salim Essa. This was the evidence of two travel agents who work for the company, at the state capture commission on Tuesday.

Halima Allana and Sameera Sooliman appeared before the commission to answer to questions relating to travel arrangements of several high profile government executives including Singh, Koko and former mineral resources minister Mosebenzi Zwane.

Sooliman said she had known Gupta associate Salim Essa since her days at another agency, where she worked until her former colleague Allana established her own business with the help of her father, and employed her. The pair described their operational arrangement as one where they were the principal agents, with one other employee handling general administrative tasks, and would often be privy to each other's responsibilities to clients.

Owing to the size of the company, Travel Excellence did not have a comprehensive booking system, and arrangements were often communicated via e-mail or by phone call. Both Sooliman and Allana would typically copy each other in all correspondence, so they could pick up each other's tasks where necessary.

Essa referred a lot of new clients to Travel Excellence, said Sooliman, but at the time of the establishment of the business in 2013, she had not been aware of their high-profile statuses. Sahara Computers' Ashu Chawla was one of them, and several bookings were made through him for the Gupta family.

Sooliman recalled an occasion in June 2014, when former Transnet and Eskom CFO Singh travelled to Dubai. An invoice for the flight ticket of R9 100 was made out to Singh, and charged to Essa's account. Sooliman could not say for sure who paid for it, but told the commission that Singh at times paid for his own travels.

Two months later, in August, she again arranged a trip for him, this time with his partner, also to Dubai. The pair were to travel between 6 and 10 August, and the cost of their flight tickets and accommodation, which she booked, was R60 000.

Although the invoice for the trip was made to Singh, it was again charged to Essa's account, one of few, as Travel Excellence mostly required clients to pay their expenses at the time of booking. In Essa's case, the fact that Sooliman had known him for some time and trusted him, meant that he had earned an account and could settle costs later. So trusted was he, in fact, that all expenses relating to his references would be charged to this account, but the agents would not know if the person settling was Essa or the traveller.

In the case of Singh's August trip, a payment of R60 000 was made into Sooliman's bank account, held with Nedbank, the day after the booking. Sooliman then transferred it into Travel Excellence's business account, and alerted her colleague of it, for them to create a receipt for their records.

Evidence leader Advocate Pule Seleka put to Sooliman that Singh's response to her affidavit was that the receipt in question may have been created after the fact, to establish a link between himself and Essa.

"That's not possible, because it is generated by the consortium's system," said Sooliman, explaining that the agency belonged to an umbrella body through which they could advance bookings. It is made up of a consortium of agencies of varying sizes, with different capabilities, to give smaller agencies the ability to access travel networks.

In relation to a trip by Singh's former colleague Koko in January 2016, Allana confirmed that she indeed received a request from Essa to arrange for visas for Koko's family for Dubai. Koko testified previously that his family had arranged and paid for their own trip to Indonesia, from where they would proceed to Doha, Qatar, but changed their plans and replaced the second leg with a trip to Dubai instead. When challenges with arranging their Dubai visas arose, he asked Eskom colleague Suzanne Daniels – who had arranged many travels within Eskom – for help.

Allana told the commission, however, that the requests for the visas did not come from Daniels, but from Essa, and Travel Excellence managed to sort it out. "We received an e-mail with copies of the passports for Mr Koko and his family," she said.

For flights to Dubai, and accommodation and the visas, the company charged an invoice of R100 000 to Essa's account. The money was paid later in cash, said Allana.

Koko's contention with the detail is that he paid for his own visas and accommodation, but Allana asserted that his payment never came to Travel Excellence, and the company would never arrange such an expensive trip for free. She conceded that if the payment from Essa was not in respect of Koko's trip, this was not made clear.

Allana further confirmed having booked Zwane's roundabout trip with Essa and Rajesh Gupta in September 2014 between Johannesburg, Dubai and India. Zwane admitted last week that he took the trip, but questioned how it could have been arranged by Travel Excellence. She said the request for the arrangement was done by Chawla, who often acted on behalf of the Guptas, and was settled after the fact. The bill for the trip was R166 000.

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