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Zondo Commission – Mentor presses on despite discrepancies in testimony

Former ANC MP Vytjie Mentor stuck to her guns on Tuesday, not deviating from evidence she has submitted to the commission of inquiry into state capture regarding the issue of the Gupta brothers being part of an August 2012 state visit to China, led by former president Jacob Zuma. She made a point of clarifying her position at the beginning of proceedings, affirming her testimony that all brothers were in China at the same time as she was. Mentor went as far as proposing that the only brother whose travel to the Asian country is in dispute, Atul Gupta, may very well have travelled on a separate airline. On several occasions she mixed up the names of Atul and older brother Ajay while making her argument.

Mentor had told the commission on Monday that despite evidence leader Mahlape Sello stating the Department of Home Affairs' denial that Atul had travelled outside the country on the dates in question, the official records could be leaving out the possibility that he generally uses more than one passport. While Sello acknowledged the possibility, and added that the records obtained were in relation to all of his known passports, Mentor remained resolute in her stance. She asked commission chairperson Raymond Zondo to consider that there was a parliamentary inquiry into the relationship between the Guptas and the department. For this reason, consideration for the official outcome of that inquiry should be made.

Another point of contention was travel records released to the commission by South African Airways (SAA), in relation to Mentor's alleged travels between Cape Town and Johannesburg shortly after the China trip – during this local trip, she claims, an expected meeting with Zuma turned out to be an ambush by Ajay Gupta, who offered her the ministry of public enterprises. When the commission proposed that a witness be sought from SAA to discuss the validity of the records in question, Mentor objected, asking rather for a neutral person, as an SAA official would only serve to defend the official information released by the company.

She insisted that, despite the SAA records saying she did not travel with the airline in September 2012, there was no way that the meeting could not have happened in that month, owing to her recollection of a comment to Zuma at the Gupta home in Saxonwold that referred to the China trip of two weeks prior. In her initial testimony, Mentor said although she was invited officially to a meeting with Zuma – which required her to travel from her base in Cape Town to Gauteng as she expected – she was instead fetched from the airport by people who took her to the Gupta-owned Sahara computers in Midrand, and then later to the family home. During a dispute with Ajay Gupta over the offer he had made, which Mentor found irregular, Zuma appeared from one of the rooms of the house and proceeded to calm her down, as she had become visibly agitated.

When Sello moved on to the issue of Mentor's disclosure of the encounter with Ajay to her other MP colleagues on the standing committee on intelligence, the commission's evidence contradicted Mentor's. She had initially told the commission that home affairs minister Siyabonga Cwele was one of the people that expressed interest in the matter after she raised it. Mentor had also said that Cwele was the chairperson of the committee, a point Sello disputed with evidence that in 2010 Cwele was a

cabinet minister and not an MP. Mentor then clarified that she may have mixed up the instances on which she mentioned the Guptas. On the one occasion, she recalled, she made an informal comment, in Cwele's presence, about the need for the committee to discuss the family, but this was in 2008, when he was still in the committee. The occasion on which she had testified last year did indeed happen in 2010.

Mentor also told MP Dennis Bloem about her encounter with Ajay, during a discussion over tea. Sello read extracts from Bloem's statement regarding the matter, in which there were disparities with Mentor's account of the event. At this point Mentor's legal representative, Advocate Anthony Gotz, rose to address Zondo on what he said was selective leading by Sello. His argument was that most of Bloem's statement corroborates Mentor's account, but is not put forward, giving the impression that there are only differences of positions between the two.

Sello clarified that her intention was only to give Mentor an opportunity to respond to Bloem's version of events where it differs to hers, while she has the stand, so that she responds immediately to them.

Mentor next faces cross-examination by the lawyers for former Zuma chief of staff Lakela Kaunda, whom she claims phoned her the evening before she travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg, to invite her on behalf of Zuma. Kaunda disputes that she was in contact with Mentor at the time.

Following this, the lawyers for advocate Mandla Mtolo of the Hawks will follow up with their own questioning. Mtolo is implicated by Mentor as having interfered with the statement she made to the police regarding the offer made to her by Ajay.

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