

LULU BLOWS R2m

Minister Xingwana splurged on designer office furniture

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Sunday Independent

CANDICE BAILEY

WOMEN, Children and People with Disabilities Minister Lulu Xingwana splurged R2.1 million of taxpayers' money redecorating the department's head office with new furniture – even buying visitor chairs with chrome legs – less than two years after the ministry was established.

Almost half of the money was allegedly used to overhaul the minister's office with custom-made furniture – with Xingwana allegedly spending close to R500 000 on two occasions with two suppliers.

The Sunday Independent has seen documents detailing 11 purchases of furniture, crockery, cutlery and kitchen appliances.

And according to the document, in at least five of the 11 purchases, officials deviated from the supply chain procedures and did not get quotes from three suppliers before making the purchase.

While the department is responsible for purchasing its own furniture, furniture for the ministry – and particularly the minister's office – is bought through the prestige budget of the Department of Public Works.

But Xingwana's spokesman Cornelius Monama said that when the minister moved to her new office in Pretoria, there was no furniture.

"The furniture she used when she was at the Union Buildings was left in the Presidency.

"In her Cape Town office, the minister is still using the previous minister's furniture," said Monama.

Commenting on deviations, Monama referred to one instance of a deviation where only two service providers quoted instead of three.

He said it was recommended by the former chief financial officer and approved by the former director-general on an urgent basis because departmental staff had to vacate the Union Buildings urgently in order to make way for the deputy minister in the Presidency.

Monama said the minister had instituted an investigation relating to irregularities and non-compliance with supply chain processes.

"The minister is committed to dealing with any irregularities firmly and transparently.

"You are also aware that those implicated are going through disciplinary processes while others have left the employ of the department," said Monama.

The revelation comes one week after The Sunday Independent reported that Xingwana was on a list of ministers who were likely to get the chop when President Jacob Zuma next reshuffles his cabinet.

It also follows reports accusing Xingwana of using her position to remove her nephew's two-year-old daughter from her mother after the toddler's parents had been in a custody battle.

The furniture document reveals how the ministry spent R495 316.38 at Disegno Designs – a Gauteng-

based furniture designer who makes custom-made couches and chairs.

Disegno Designs confirmed that it had provided the ministry with furniture but would not give details.

However, a source privy to the order, who did not wish to be named for fear of victimisation, said the purchase was for furniture in Xingwana's office, for her personal assistant's office and for the reception area.

"It included orders for curtains to the tune of R60 000," said the source.

The order for Disegno, said the source, included five couches, boardroom chairs, visitor chairs and occasional chairs.

Specifically for the minister's office, Disegno provided two visitor chairs with chrome legs, and two occasional chairs.

Three of the couches, which used high-density foam and expensive fabric, and two occasional chairs were for the reception area.

The occasional chairs cost just under R10 000 each, said the source.

Disegno also provided 12 custom-made boardroom chairs with backs that were 1.4m high. Each chair cost the department about R3 400, amounting to R40 000 for the set.

Despite that purchase, there is a separate order for boardroom furniture amounting to R191 700.

For the director-general and the office of the director-general, Xingwana spent R125 189 on furniture from Wetherlys and another R6 019 on crockery from Boardmans.

The crockery order, according to the document, was cancelled.

Office furniture for the department cost Xingwana R462 200 and R354 240.

In another submission, labelled "furniture for the minister's office", an order of R489 118.60 was placed with Mobilia office furniture.

Mobilia would not comment.

The first purchases for Xingwana's office happened six months after her appointment, in May 2011, followed by a second purchase in November.

The smallest purchase – of R4 288.56 – was for crockery, cutlery and kitchen equipment for the department.

Xingwana then spent another R18 658.80 on crockery for the ministry, bought at Binuns, the kitchen appliance specialist.

In a separate entry, kitchen appliances for the minister's office cost another R34 607.41.

Monama insisted that the minister did not personally take part in purchasing furniture or any items.

"It is a departmental matter handled by the director-general (in her capacity as accounting officer)," said Monama.

Xingwana has been in the media spotlight on several occasions in recent months.

She was most recently in the news over allegations that she was so desperate to axe some of her staff that she hired a top labour law firm to advise her on how she could "short circuit" their disciplinary hearings – and at what cost.

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