

A NATION DIVIDED

Mantashe defends his refusal to address veterans

GEORGE MATLALA, NONI MOKATI AND TONNY NYAMBO

ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe refused to address party members gathered at Luthuli House on Friday, the party headquarters in Johannesburg, further risking incurring the wrath of President Jacob Zuma's backers.

The Sunday Independent understands that Mantashe, who, together with top party officials Zweli Mkhize and Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, publicly criticised Zuma over his recent cabinet reshuffle, was approached by his deputy Jessie Duarte and Ekurhuleni mayor Mzwandile Masina to address the gathering. Mantashe, who was spotted entering the building in the morning, left at 2pm without addressing the crowd, who chanted and toyi-toyed in support of Zuma. Among those chanting Zuma's name were members of the Unkhonto we Sizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA), who were there to defend Luthuli House from DA supporters.

Asked why he didn't address them, Mantashe said yesterday: "It would have been irresponsible for me to do that because it would be tantamount to the ANC pouring petrol onto a fire. So I refused."

He added: "I refused to go to any march organised by anyone. I refused to be part of a posture. I think the ANC needs a serious discussion on the readiness of society and its allies in the alliance. This period requires cool heads."

MKMVA chairperson Kebby Maphatsoe said he had heard Mantashe had refused to address members. "It would have been nice for the SG to come (to) address members of the ANC who came to Luthuli House. In the absence of officials, he is the CEO of the organisation," he said.

Duarte refused to comment and Masina could not be reached for comment.



HAPPY FAMILY: President Jacob Zuma with ministers Des van Rooyen and Faith Muthambi at the unveiling of Collins Chabane's tombstone. PICTURE: GCIS

In a further indication that Zuma remains unperturbed by the calls for him to step down, he used the unveiling of the tombstone of the late public service and administration minister Collins Chabane in Xikundu village, Malamulele, Limpopo, yesterday to hit back at his critics. "I'm so happy that people didn't use (the Collins Chabane unveiling) to fight their own political battles," he said.

"Today I'm here (and) if anyone had stood up and used this unveiling to divide the organisation, I would stand up and tell that person to sit down. I would like to thank the chairperson of the ANC in this place that he sets a good example by not dividing the organisation," he said.

It was Zuma's first public appearance since Friday's marches. He shared the stage with former Eskom boss and now ANC MP Brian Molefe, who spoke on behalf of Chabane's

friends, as well as Mineral Resources Minister Moshebenzi Zwane and the new Public Service and Administration Minister Faith Muthambi.

Molefe described Chabane as a humble and disciplined cadre. This comes as Zuma is set to face leaders of the SACP who have called for him to resign, at the annual wreath-laying ceremony for former SACP general secretary Chris Hani in Boksburg tomorrow.

The president will preside over the commemorative event against the background of a tumultuous week marked by massive protests against him.

Further protests have been organised for Wednesday as opposition parties seek to ratchet up the pressure on him to resign, in the wake of his cabinet reshuffle, and the S&P Global and Fitch downgrades of South Africa to junk status.

Zuma has survived an ANC

national working committee (NWC) meeting to discuss the cabinet reshuffle but he will face the same structure tomorrow during an ordinary sitting.

The president celebrates his 75th birthday on Wednesday, but that is likely to be drowned by more protests.

However, Zuma will be spared the wrath of the communists tomorrow when he addresses the Hani commemoration, which is a government event.

He has awkwardly to share the platform with leaders of the two ANC allies who have called for him to step down.

SACP second deputy general secretary Solly Mapaila said Zuma would not have addressed the event if it had not been run by the government.

He said members would make the event as respectable as possible for Hani's sake.

"It is a government event. There is nothing we can do. If it was ours, there is no way that this would be happening," he said, adding that this year Hani's grave would be officially declared a national heritage site by Zuma.

He said the SACP would not let the party's anger cloud the importance of the event. "This is important to Comrade Hani and his family."

Mapaila said the SACP's feelings towards Zuma remained unchanged. But in what is an indication that Zuma would not face any threats, the SACP has deployed its chairperson Senzeni Zokwana to address the gathering. Instead of Mapaila or general secretary Blade Nzimande and first deputy general secretary Jeremy Cronin.

Mapaila and Cronin have used Ahmed Kathrada's funeral and memorial services to explain to society why the party wanted Zuma to resign.

The Sunday Independent has also established that Cosatu would not use the Hani ceremony to rally workers against Zuma.

Mantashe said he expected Zuma to address Hani's commemoration without incident. "Hani was an ANC NEC member and leader of the SACP. He was in MK command. So the president of the ANC and the country should speak there. There is no contradiction," he said.

When told the SACP was sending Zokwana, Mantashe said he was not aware of this but would be surprised if that happened.

A Cosatu official said any attack on Zuma at the Thomas Nkobi Memorial Park in Boksburg would anger ANC officials, who have agreed to do follow-up meetings with the federation and garner him sympathy. It is understood that Cosatu and SACP have a multipronged strategy which would eventually lead to calls for his recall by the

ANC national executive committee, should he refuse to step down.

But the NWC and the ANC youth and women's leagues have come out in support of Zuma.

Mantashe said there would be no special NEC to deal with the Zuma matter as demanded by some of the president's opponents, who feel that the NWC can't make final decisions on party issues without the party's highest decision-making body between conferences having a final say.

He said the ANC was unfazed by protests against its leader. "It's a class struggle. Many of the people on the streets on Friday won't and didn't vote for the ANC. Many of the whites on the streets on Friday won't come when you protest against the issues that directly affect black people. Why? Simply because they are looking out for their own interests."

Mantashe denied that the three top six officials who initially criticised Zuma publicly had made an about-turn or were defeated in the NWC.

Zuma had only consulted them about the finance minister and not the rest of the cabinet changes. He said Zuma came up with Brian Molefe as Gordhan's replacement, and they rejected it outright and told him that it would be irresponsible to bring Molefe in under the current climate and in light of the cloud over his head. They also told him that changing the finance minister in the current climate was risky.

He said Zuma had been talking to them about changing the finance minister since November last year. "We told the president that if he appointed Brian he will be showing society the middle finger."

"It is grossly incorrect to say that we have made a U-turn or that we were defeated in the NWC. It's a distortion that finds resonance in the heavily factionalised climate. We are all committed to not be seen to fight in public, to save the image of the party. That can't be a defeat. That's not a U-turn," said Mantashe.

He added: "We also said while the president has a prerogative to change the cabinet, consultation can't be a favour."

He said they disagreed strongly on the intelligence report which Zuma didn't share with them but used as the basis for firing Gordhan.

"It's now being shared publicly and, interestingly, the state security minister says he knows nothing about it, which confirms our position that the report couldn't have been the basis to fire the minister."

"However, we accepted that the relationship between the two had irretrievably broken down," he said.