

Mentor trips up under the spotlight

The state capture witness admits to mixing up names and fails to remember key dates

Sarah Smit

The second week of the Zondo commission started off with the expectation that former ANC MP Vytjie Mentor's testimony would be similarly explosive to Mcebisi Jonas's bombshell revelations of the previous week. Instead the new week saw doubt cast on the second witness's allegations.

The testimony delivered by Jonas, the former deputy minister of finance, who was allegedly offered a promotion and a bribe of R600-million by the Guptas in exchange for his co-operation, yielded two new and serious allegations: Gupta patriarch, Ajay, had threatened to kill Jonas, and senior officials in the Hawks had tried to foil an investigation of the bribe.

Jonas recounted how the head of the Hawks' anti-corruption unit allegedly attempted to coerce him into signing a statement that would halt the police investigation into the matter. The statement was presented to him by Major General Zinhle Mnonopi, dispatched to deal with the Democratic Alliance's complaint by Berning Ntlemenza, the head of the Hawks at the time.

Advocate Phillip Mokoena SC, who led Friday's testimony, asked Jonas whether the police statement he was asked to sign was false, to which he replied yes and said he had refused to sign it.

On Saturday, the parliamentary portfolio committee on police called for an independent investigation into Jonas's claims about the Hawks.

When Mentor took the stand on Monday, she made similar allegations, and Mnonopi's name was raised again, when it emerged that she had made an application to cross-examine Jonas.

Mentor's testimony, which recounted how she was allegedly also offered a position in Zuma's Cabinet by Ajay Gupta in 2010, took up more than two sittings of the commission — Mentor paid gruelling attention to detail and was rigorously grilled by advocate Mahlape Sello.

Like Jonas's statement that it was possibly Atul and not Ajay he met, Mentor conceded that she found it difficult to distinguish between the Gupta brothers, specifically Ajay and Atul. She also admitted to having mistakenly named Brian Hlongwa in her 2017 book *No Holy Cows* as having accompanied the Guptas on a trip to China. She had meant to name Fana Hlongwane, adviser to former defence minister Joe Modise, who is said to have benefited from the 1999 arms deal.

"It comes as an issue of confusing Hlongwa and Hlongwane but I know for certain that that man was not the former MEC for health in Gauteng," she said.

Maleka said Hlongwane has also applied to cross-examine Mentor.

Mentor's apparent confusion was compounded by her inability to remember key dates, including that of the alleged meeting with Ajay.

Mentor flew from Cape Town to Johannesburg to attend this meeting, which she told the commission she had thought would be with then-president Jacob Zuma. She said she had arrived in Johannesburg on a Monday. Mentor insisted she had flown on SAA to Johannesburg and back again but there was no record of the return flight. The evidence team could not confirm the date of her flights.

Zondo suggested that she may have flown with another airline on the second trip but Sello said there was also no record of Mentor having taken a Monday flight between Johannesburg and Cape Town.



Holy cow: In her testimony to the state capture commission former ANC MP Vytjie Mentor alleged that a Gupta brother (Ajay or Atul) offered her a post in Jacob Zuma's Cabinet. Photo: Oupa Nkosi

Mentor's statement was put to a further test when it was compared with the version of events recounted in an affidavit submitted by Lakela Kaunda, the former presidential aide who Mentor said had co-ordinated the Johannesburg meeting.

Kaunda said she did not contact Mentor to arrange the meeting and that she was not stationed at the ANC headquarters, Luthuli House, at the time. But Mentor insisted she was certain it was Kaunda to whom she had spoken to.

Mentor contended that Kaunda's affidavit to the commission was in answer to a "corrupted" version of a statement she had given to the police in 2016.

On Tuesday, Mentor revealed she had resolved to lay charges against "a number of people" at the Durbanville police station. This was after she divulged the details of her alleged 2010 meeting with Ajay Gupta in a 2015 Facebook post.

She said she had requested to make her statement at home, because her allegations implicated high-profile officials. Mentor recounted how two

police captains came to her house the next morning, where they transcribed her statement.

"We had breakfast, we had lunch, we had dinner; we continued with the task," Mentor said. They only finished taking her statement at 9pm, Mentor said.

She said her handwritten statement was "airlifted" in a private jet to Pretoria at the behest of Ntlemenza. She was approached by Hawks advocate Mandla Mtolo some time towards the end of May, who presented her a "corrupted" version of her statement, she said.

Mentor read out her original handwritten statement on Tuesday. In it, she said certain ministers, "as well as the president to a certain extent", have "a corrupt relationship that gives unfair advantage to the Gupta family".

She was told by Mtolo to remove the phrase "as well as the president to a certain extent", Mentor said.

On Tuesday, Mtolo had also applied for leave to cross-examine Mentor. He denies Mentor's claim that he had anything to do with the "corrupted" statement other than having presented it to Mentor.

The advocate for the Hawks, Vincent Siwela, told the *Mail & Guardian* that both Mtolo and Mnonopi denied the allegations made against them.

On Wednesday, advocate Vincent Maleka SC, of the commission's legal team, cast further aspersions on the Hawks, accusing the unit of demon-

strating a "pattern of behaviour".

This was raised during the testimony of former head of government communication and information systems Themba Maseko. In his testimony before the commission, Maseko detailed how Ajay Gupta had allegedly approached him in 2010 about the launch of the Gupta-owned newspaper *The New Age*.

Maseko told the commission about his encounters with the Hawks in 2018. They had approached him about their investigation into the Gupta family in April. The Hawks were preparing to lay charges against the Guptas and had asked to meet Maseko about his allegations.

He told the commission this meeting with the Hawks never happened. Instead, months later, he was approached by another unit of the Hawks, this time about an investigation into an information technology contract Maseko had signed when he was director general of the department of public works in 2005.

The details of the case were revealed in a *Sunday Times* report published in July. Hawks spokesperson Hangwani Mulaudzi told the newspaper he was not aware of the investigation.

Maleka, who was leading Maseko's testimony, commented that it was unfair that the witness should have "a cloud hanging over him regarding something that happened 13 years ago".