

Dismiss my 'lying' DG, minister asks Cyril

Public works feud spirals as Nxesi takes his gripe to the top

By **MZILIKAZI wa AFRIKA**

● Public works minister Thulas Nxesi wants President Cyril Ramaphosa to remove the department's director-general, Sam Vukela, for alleged insubordination and lying, amid warnings that keeping him in the post could "return the department to the days of the Nkandla scandal".

In a letter to Ramaphosa dated August 20, Nxesi says Vukela should be redeployed because he was refusing to follow instructions, had lied to him about departmental affairs and had poor knowledge "about matters within the department".

Nxesi said Vukela had defied him on a range of issues, including the submission of reports to parliament.

"It is therefore my conclusion that I will not be able to achieve any progress with the same DG and have lost trust in him," the letter reads.

"All his actions demonstrate a conduct which is deliberately aimed at undermining my authority."

Ramaphosa's spokesperson, Khusela Diko, confirmed yesterday that the president had received the letter and said he was "applying his mind" to it.

But Vukela hit back this week, saying it was Nxesi who was telling lies.

"The minister lied to the president in his letter. He has preconceived ideas about me and lacks leadership," Vukela said.

"The minister clearly showed a lack of leadership. Why didn't he sit me down and ask me to explain myself before writing his letter loaded with lies to the president?"

The row is the latest chapter in a long-

running feud between the two men.

Nxesi had Vukela fired in 2013 after the then public protector, Thuli Madonsela, criticised his role both in the Nkandla scandal and in leases the public works department signed with businessman Roux Shabangu for police office space.

But Vukela was reinstated last year after a challenge in the labour bargaining council and was appointed DG in November by a panel of ministers comprising Nxesi's predecessor Nathi Nhleko, his deputy Jeremy Cronin, Des van Rooyen and Faith Muthambi.

Shortly after the interview, Cronin wrote a memo to Nhleko, who chaired the panel, raising "several major concerns" about



Thulas Nxesi



Sam Vukela

Three strikes

● "I will not be able to achieve any progress with the same DG and have lost trust in him ... [his conduct is] deliberately aimed at undermining my authority." — Public works minister Thulas Nxesi.

● "I am very concerned that clumsiness on our part may serve to reopen the whole [Nkandla] issue." — Public works deputy minister Jeremy Cronin in November 2017.

● The then public protector, Thuli Madonsela, found Vukela guilty of maladministration for instructing that millions be redirected to fund the Nkandla upgrades.

Vukela because he had not been asked to explain his roles in the scandals over Nkandla and the police leases.

"Over the past few years the department and government more broadly, following a series of corrective measures, have succeeded in moving beyond the Nkandla matter," Cronin wrote.

"I am very concerned that clumsiness on our part at this point may serve to reopen the whole issue once more."

Nhleko ignored Cronin's concerns and went ahead and appointed Vukela.

Vukela said this week Nxesi was trying to get rid of him because he had refused to appoint Fikile Hugo, who he described as a friend of the minister's, to a top position in the department.

Nxesi eventually used his powers as minister to hire Hugo as chief director of stakeholder engagements. The appointment is now being probed by the Public Service Commission following complaints from disgruntled staff in the department's human resources division.

Nxesi's spokesperson, Sabelo Mali, said yesterday the minister had known Hugo for more than 25 years but denied they were friends. "The minister has decided to bring Hugo back to the department due to his skills and expertise, nothing else."

Mali said the minister did not need Vukela's permission "when there is a need to bring a skill to the department".

Vukela said he hoped the president would seek his version of events.

"I have nothing to do with the refurbishment of Nkandla ... and the National Prosecuting Authority refused to press any charges because I have no case to answer," he said.

"As for the police scandal, I was disciplined and fired but won the case at the bargaining council. The department was forced to reinstate me ... and to this day they have never appealed that ruling."

Cronin this week declined to comment.