

It's not beyond the morals of some of these people to use a funeral to steal

THEMBA GODI
Chairperson of the National Assembly

R30m spent on three state funerals

Parties raise questions over 'unforeseeable and unavoidable' expenditure

LOYISO SIDIMBA

CONCERN has been raised over the government laying out R30 million on three official state funerals since April and declaring the expenditure "unforeseeable and unavoidable".

The unforeseeable and unavoidable expenditure was redirected from the Department of Public Works' budgets for property payments, administrative fees, advertising, communications, fleet services, travel and subsistence, venues and facilities, social benefits, consultants, training and development and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

According to the adjusted estimates of national expenditure released during Finance Minister Tito Mboweni's Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement this week, the department diverted amounts ranging from R70 000 to R4.8m for the three official state funerals.

The personalities who received official state funerals were not revealed, and the department's spokesperson Sabelo Mali could not respond to enquiries yesterday.

A number of Struggle stalwarts, legendary artists and other prominent South Africans have had their funerals declared state, official and provincial official funerals this year. Public representatives qualify for official state funerals.

The state, official and provincial official funeral policy, which was published in 2016, also affords the spouse of a serving president or a deputy president as well as persons of extraordinary credentials or specifically designated by the president.

Speakers of provincial legislatures, MECs, Judge-Presidents and distinguished and outstanding persons specially designated by the president on the request of a premier can have provincial official funerals.

The policy also states that in state, official or special official funerals, the departments involved are responsible for reasonable costs related to the services they are expected to offer, which are funeral undertaker costs including the coffin and limited catering for the family and official guests.

Chairperson of the National Assembly's standing committee on public accounts Themba Godi told Independent Media yesterday that the failure to budget for funerals opens



TITO MBOWENI in the Parliament's media centre during his Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement speech. | PHANDO JIKELO African News Agency (ANA)

the door for all sort of wrongs such as happened in former president Nelson Mandela's funeral.

"It's not beyond the morals of some of these people to use a funeral to steal," said Godi.

Several high-profile ANC leaders and the governing party's employees to government are facing criminal charges in the Eastern Cape for stealing almost R6m to organise memorial services for the Struggle icon's funeral in the Buffalo City Metro in December 2013. While Godi would not com-

ment on the R30m spent this year, he said the department should budget for funerals as contingencies. DA MP Malcolm Figg said the spending of R30m on three funerals was unacceptable but added that he didn't want to appear insensitive.

He said he would write to Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi to find out what the money was spent on.

Chairperson of the portfolio committee on public works, Humphrey Mmemenzi, said the expenditure was justifiable as funerals were quite emo-

tional and the government needed to be humane. "We are a caring government," he said.

Meanwhile, the Department of Public Works' Prestige Policy, which deals with the maintenance of ministerial houses, Parliament and parliamentary villages, has been given an additional R22.1m.

Figg said the Prestige Policy was not using its allocation effectively and that the additional R22.1m was justifiable.

The Prestige portfolio, which spent more than R95.5m in 2017/18, pro-

vides fully furnished residential and office accommodation to its clients such as political office-bearers, the Chief Justice and Deputy Chief Justice, Speaker of the National Assembly and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, MPs, directors-general and sessional officials.

It is also responsible for the implementation of security measures for members of the executive at state-owned houses, as well as in their private residences designated as official residences.