

# Mentor resolute despite Zondo commission grilling

## NEWS ANALYSIS

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Former ANC MP Vytjie Mentor's refusal to yield to blows knocking her credibility this week has left the Zondo commission of inquiry into state capture with the dilemma of possibly having to embark on the staggering task of proving her claims.

This week Mentor became the first of the commission's witnesses to be cross-examined and, despite critical gaps in her claims and evidence contradicting them, she stood by her testimony.

Mentor's main allegation is that the Gupta patriarch, Ajay, offered her the job of public enterprises minister at a clandestine meeting at the family's Saxonwold compound sometime in 2010. She has also alleged that former president Jacob Zuma emerged to calm her down after she rejected the offer.

During her testimony in August last year, she 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 department of trade and industry trip to China in 2010. She had meant to name arms

deal adviser Fana Hlongwane. In November, Mentor's lawyers wrote to the commission to explain that she realised she had made a mistake in identifying Hlongwane — and was wrong in both instances. During her appearance before the commission on Monday, Mentor reiterated her apology to Hlongwane for the mistake.

The 2010 China trip became the first point of contention picked up by the commission this week. During her earlier testimony, Mentor told the commission that all three Gupta brothers — Ajay, Rajesh and Atul — were at a conference in Beijing.

Mentor alleged that on the trip an initial attempt was made by "a Gupta" to co-ordinate a meeting between her and Zuma. In an affidavit to the commission, Ajay dismissed this allegation as "simply not true".

**Cross-examined:  
Vytjie Mentor  
stands by her  
testimony**



Ajay's affidavit was put to Mentor on Monday. She refuted his disagreements with her testimony.

But records from the department of home affairs seemingly back up at least one of Ajay Gupta's contentions, namely that his brother Atul was not in China for the state trip.

Mentor asked whether the records accounted for the claim that Atul has more than one passport. Advocate Mahlape Sello, who led Mentor's evidence, assured her that a number of passports belonging to Atul were reflected in the home affairs records.

But Mentor would not concede that Atul was not on the state trip to China, saying she has a "serious problem with the home affairs records" and citing last year's parliamentary inquiry into the Guptas' alleged capture of the department.

Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, the commission's chair, said the commission would consider calling a witness from home affairs.

Mentor's trip from Cape Town to Johannesburg was also disputed after records from the airline could not account for it at the time of the alleged Saxonwold meeting. A witness from SAA would be called, said Zondo.

In her previous testimony, Mentor claimed that she

travelled to Johannesburg on SAA on a Monday sometime in September or October 2010. Mentor said she had had "no joy" with SAA's records, noting discrepancies between them and Parliament's records of her travels. The SAA records don't bear Mentor's name and are not printed on any official letterhead.

An October 15 2010 trip between Cape Town and Johannesburg was reflected in Parliament's records. But Mentor would not concede that this was the flight she took on the day of the Saxonwold meeting. October 15 would have been a Friday and she insisted she travelled on a Monday.

This Tuesday, Mentor was cross-examined by Henry Cowley, counsel for Zuma's former presidential aide Lakela Kaunda. Mentor has alleged that Kaunda called her the Sunday before the Saxonwold meeting to set up what was supposed to be a rendezvous with Zuma.

Phone records provided by Kaunda did not reflect the Sunday evening phone call, but Mentor also questioned their validity.

Zondo emphasised the importance of pinning down the facts of the trip because failing to establish that it actually took place would compromise Mentor's credibility.

"It is quite an important part, because before one can talk about whether there was a meeting or not,

one has got to know how you got to the meeting," Zondo said on Monday.

The commission could also not corroborate Mentor's recollection of the Saxonwold compound. In December last year, the commission conducted an on-site inspection of the compound. But experts from the department of public works were unable to confirm definitely that the compound had the features Mentor detailed in August.

This week, Mentor suggested that the compound had undergone renovations in the nine years since she visited it. The forensic investigation needed to determine this would cost at least R810 000, Sello pointed out.

On Tuesday, Mentor's counsel, Anthony Gotz, objected to what he considered an "imbalanced" questioning of his client by the commission. Gotz suggested too much emphasis had been put on contradicting evidence and not enough on Mentor's claims that had been corroborated.

Mentor said she had felt cross-examined. "My evidence has been questioned all the way and all the time."

The two-day exercise has yielded more questions than answers and Mentor's refusal to budge on aspects of her testimony means the commission will have to do even more digging to determine their validity.