

Media statement by the office of Mr Marthinus Van Schalkwyk, Minister of Tourism

Monday 6 September 2010

The office of the Minister of Tourism, Mr Marthinus van Schalkwyk, would like to place on record a number of facts with reference to recent allegations by the Democratic Alliance (DA) that the Minister was “absent without leave” from parliamentary sessions.

The DA, in a statement released on Sunday 5 September by its chief whip, Mr Ian Davidson, alleges that number of members of cabinet members have failed on more than one occasion to supply an explanation for why they missed an oral question session in parliament. Minister van Schalkwyk is included a list of the top six offenders who have allegedly missed sessions without explanation and are therefore guilty of disregarding parliament and hindering its ability to perform its oversight role.

The statement does not give the number of instances on which Minister van Schalkwyk is alleged to have failed to tender an apology, nor does it give any dates on which this is alleged to have occurred. Despite the absence of any such facts, Mr Davidson makes a number of generalised statements about the behavior of cabinet members, including that the cabinet displays an “increasing disregard for accountability and transparency”.

Minister van Schalkwyk would like to note that he respects the important role of the parliament as an institution and he takes his responsibilities in terms of reporting to parliament extremely seriously. The Minister also notes the important role that the opposition plays in parliament.

Minister van Schalkwyk’s office would like to place the following facts on record:

1. Minister van Schalkwyk has never missed any parliamentary session without tendering an apology in terms of the appropriate procedures.
2. The Minister has always provided answers to all parliamentary questions, both in oral and written format, and all answers to questions from his office are up to date.
3. In the fifteen months since the current administration assumed office in May 2009 there have been two occasions on which there have been questions for oral reply on the order paper for the Minister to respond to.
4. In these cases the Minister’s office tendered an apology timeously and in writing for his absence.
5. With reference to the session of 16 September 2009, the Minister’s office tendered an apology on his behalf at 12:02 on 15 September 2009.
6. The Minister was not available to attend parliament as he was out of the country on an official visit representing the country at the Japanese Association of Travel Agents (JATA) Annual World Tourism and Travel Congress.
7. The first of the six questions to be answered by the Minister was 32nd on the order paper, with the rest of the questions following after that. At best about 15 oral questions are dealt with in any such a parliamentary session. Based on the

order paper, it was therefore clear that Minister van Schalkwyk's questions would not be dealt with in the house on that day. According to the official Hansard records of the session, on that particular date only the first 11 questions were dealt with.

8. However, in order to ensure that his answers were available to members despite the fact that the questions would not be dealt with in the house on that day, the Minister handed in written responses to the questions at 16:15 on 15 September 2009, the day before the sitting.
9. With reference to the session of 25 August 2010, the Minister's office tendered an apology for his absence at 10:10 on 23 August 2010.
10. The reason for his not being available to attend the session was the fact that the Minister was accompanying President Jacob Zuma on a head of state visit to China.
11. In terms of this particular session, the Minister ensured that the Deputy Minister of Tourism, Ms Tokozile Xasa, was available in parliament to deal with the questions. The official records show that of the three questions on the order paper, only one was prioritised. The Deputy Minister dealt with this question in the house and members were given an opportunity to ask follow-up questions.
12. Responses to the questions were submitted at 08:43 on 25 August, prior to the commencement of the sitting.
13. Whilst it is not required by parliamentary rules, in both cases the Minister's office took the initiative to submit written responses to all questions prior to the sittings.

It is very unfortunate that the DA considers it prudent and appropriate to make serious allegations about the disregard of parliament which are not based in fact. This office takes its responsibility in terms of accountability very seriously and considers it to be in the public interest to make facts, as opposed to generalised accusations, available to the media and the public.

To allege that any member of parliament is not taking his or her parliamentary duties seriously and is disrespecting the institution of parliament is a very serious claim. Based on the facts it is clear that Minister van Schalkwyk did not disregard parliament and his office is therefore requesting that the office of the chief whip of the DA retract his statements about Minister van Schalkwyk and tender an apology.

Enquiries:

Ronel Bester
Ministry of Tourism
Tel:+2721 465 7240
+2783 242 7763
rbester@tourism.gov.za

Natasha Rockman
Ministry of Tourism
Tel:+2721 465 7240
+2776 429 2264
nrockman@tourism.gov.za