



tourism

Department:
Tourism
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MEDIA STATEMENT

TOURISM DIRECTOR GENERAL VICTOR THARAGE STRONGLY REFUTES “STAFF BULLYING” ALLEGATIONS AS DEMEANING AND MALICIOUS

14 August 2024

In this all-important August month akin to women’s rights in our country, I found myself being paraded as a face of workplace bullying against women through the city press article titled “Bullying DG allegedly fuelling resignations and mental health crisis among women staff”, published 11 August 2024, which was also published on New24.

The timing of the article seemed to be well calculated to coincide with the all-important Women’s day celebrations, and to deliberately misdirect the public’s attention to baseless and unfounded allegations without a shred of evidence. Sadly, the article completely ignored substantive objective facts and evidence provided during the interview, and in the written responses to the media questions.

It is for this reason that I deem it necessary to set the record straight on the allegations as they are not only a misrepresentation of facts, but are also very malicious, dishonest and highly defamatory.

The article attributes utterances to myself allegedly made at the Departmental strategic planning session wherein it’s alleged that “Tharage said he was least worried about this article as it would not have an impact on him”. I must state for the record that I never made such utterances and the session was audio recorded, begging the question as to what was the motive behind such levels of disinformation to the media. It could only be to inflict personal injury to my reputation.

Furthermore, the article speaks of an employee that is working from home for three months due to my alleged “bullying”. I must also state that I don’t have any official record of any senior manager working from home, let alone for the last three months.

I would like to highlight some important facts regarding the recent departures of women at senior management level in the Department. The article indicates that one of these senior managers left because the State Security Agency (SSA) was requested to conduct a Security Clearance process on her. It is almost public knowledge that Public Servants and in particular senior managers have to undergo security clearance processes without exception. The Department’s request, which is done by functionaries outside myself, for SSA to conduct a

security clearance of any employee of the Department cannot be labelled as “bullying” and should never lead to a resignation.

In another case, a senior manager had an adverse finding from a Public Service Commission (PSC) investigation which recommended disciplinary action, but left the Department on transfer before the disciplinary processes could commence. Another manager had travelled on business with a subordinate using the subordinate’s vehicle, but attempted to claim for the travel mileages upon return as if she used her own vehicle and when this was discovered, she resigned. Two managers left for better opportunities aligned to their career interests and they both had meetings with me to express their appreciation for the opportunity to serve in the department.

I would like to highlight that the article refers to “using excessive power to abuse female employees especially senior managers”. This is gross representation of facts. The reality is that I demand expected performance, give constructive feedback on poor performance that has impact on portfolio commitments to Parliament during management reviews, and act against the disregard of processes and procedures as required in the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA). This level of accountability is upheld without exception for both men and women in the senior management of the organisation and should not be misconstrued to be intended for embarrassment.

Similarly, good performance on matters that are brought to management platforms is acknowledged and commended. In one instance specifically involving one of the stated senior managers in the article, I raised serious concerns with attempts to enter into an irregular partnership that would have benefited a third party at the expense of their competitors without due regard to the need for a fair and competitive process as required in law. Had this happened it would have exposed the Department to litigation, possible losses and a material irregularity.

The bias towards the third-party company, despite guidance and direction provided by myself at management platforms, consequently led the Department to miss an important target on training of 225 women in the tourism industry for three consecutive years which was budgeted for.

The article also indicates that the Department is investigating cases of fruitless and wasteful expenditure amounting to over R100 million as a result of suspected maladministration and corruption against some senior managers and staffers, both male and female. It is important to indicate that the matters are being investigated by the Hawks, civil claims are being pursued through the state attorney’s office and internal disciplinary processes are underway. Some of these matters, all of which emanated from forensic investigations, are before the courts including the labour court for those cases that were dismissed under questionable circumstances. Therefore the department is no longer investigating but acting on the outcomes and recommendations of the investigation already concluded. This culture of application of consequence management is something that I uphold across the organisation

in the interest of good governance. The sixth Parliament was also briefed on the details of these matters.

These are but just some of the issues that I thought I should highlight. It is also important to state that to date no formal allegations have been brought before me, should such allegations be presented to me formally, I will engage accordingly in the interest of accountability.

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