

Junior officials blamed for cellphone jamming

Ministers in the Cabinet's security cluster have blamed junior officials for last week's jamming of cellphone signals in the National Assembly, saying the executive was not involved at an operational level as this had been left to officials...



The jamming of the signal in Parliament effectively gagged the media.
(Image: Rod Baker)

At a media briefing in Friday, State Security Minister David Mahlobo apologised for the jamming and promised an internal probe would determine if it was deliberate or not. If it was, this would be sabotage, he said.

Institute for Security Studies senior research associate Judith February said the bottom line was that the state security minister was accountable for his agents' actions. "It is utterly inconceivable that an operator could give permission for the use of a jamming device."

Mahlobo and his colleagues in the security cluster - Police Minister Nathi Nhleko, Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, and Justice and Correctional Services Minister Michael Masutha - were unapologetic about getting involved in the events surrounding the state of the nation address, saying the Powers and Privileges of Parliament and Provincial Legislatures Act gave them the authority to if requested.

"We do our job within the law and this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that we will be involved in securing" the state of the nation address, Mahlobo said. A threat analysis was always in place to determine which security measures would be applied, he said. The deployment of equipment and bodies depended on this.

He declined to throw light on the nature of the threats that had led to the use of specific equipment during the address.

Mapisa-Nqakula referred to threats to disrupt the address, insisting that all operations were informed by intelligence. The government was "very committed" to the freedom of communication for all South Africans - the address had been held in the evening precisely so that more people could hear it, she pointed out.

Democratic Alliance MP David Maynier said Mahlobo was in all-out damage control. "The minister is following a 'rogue official defence' - which has become standard operating procedure for dealing with major scandals that have broken out under President Jacob Zuma. Ultimately, a few officials will be made to walk the plank in order to firewall members of the executive from political fallout."

The real issue, Maynier said, was that the State Security Agency should never have played any role in the proceedings in Parliament.

The agency's counterintelligence mandate was recently amended by way of the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Act of 2013 and specifically excluded "lawful political activity, advocacy, protest or dissent", he said.

"The agency could only have become involved if there was a credible threat or potential threat of hostile acts of foreign intervention directed at undermining the constitutional order of the republic. The threat to disrupt Parliament, or even embarrass the president, clearly falls outside the mandate."

Source: *Business Day*, via I-Net Bridge

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