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President Mbeki: Do not dismiss Deputy-Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge. Can our people trust you on HIV/AIDS?

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NB: At about the same time this statement was released (a few minutes before the 9th of August), the presidency released a statement announcing that Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge had been dismissed.

Deputy-Minister of Health Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge has demonstrated unparalleled political leadership and competence in the struggle for better health-care in South Africa. As Deputy-Minister of Defence, she introduced antiretroviral treatment into the military. She has consistently supported the scientific governance of health policy and denounced AIDS denialism. She has helped improve the image of the South African government both at home and internationally because she has counter-balanced the President's support of denialism. She, together with Deputy-President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, led the development of the HIV/AIDS National Strategic Plan. She has unequivocally called for people to get tested and, if necessary, treated with antiretroviral treatment. She has also helped mend the relationship between civil society organisations like TAC and the AIDS Law Project with government. She has begun rebuilding relationships between the Department of Health and the country's HIV clinicians and scientists. On TB, HIV treatment and prevention, the human resources crisis in the health system and women's health, the Deputy-Minister has led and been a voice of common sense. In a ministry that has become synonymous with pseudo-science, incompetence, embarrassment and the cause of suffering, anguish and anger, she has offered honesty, integrity, leadership and hope.

For her excellent leadership, the Mail & Guardian rightly gave the Deputy-Minister the highest score on its annual ministers' report card of 2006.

President Mbeki's response has been to ask Deputy-Minister Madlala-Routledge to resign. This is a dreadful error of judgment that will harm public health-care and especially the response to the HIV epidemic. It indicates that the President still remains opposed to the science of HIV and to appropriately responding to the epidemic. We call on him to reverse his request and instead to give his full support to the Deputy-Minister. The TAC supports the Deputy-Minister's decision to refuse to resign. We urge President Mbeki to meet with all the independent civil society organizations that work in HIV/AIDS, health and human rights to discuss the following issues:

1) Does the President support the work done by the Deputy-President, Cabinet, SANAC and the country on HIV/AIDS?

2) Why does the President obfuscate the real crisis in public health management?

3) Is the President above all our people, the Constitution and only accountable to Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang?

President Mbeki gave Deputy-Minister Madlala-Routledge two reasons for his unreasonable and arbitrary demand: (1) Madlala-Routledge's handling of the Frere Hospital scandal and (2) her recent trip to Spain. Both reasons are

unfathomable. She visited Frere Hospital after the Daily Dispatch exposed the hospital's dreadful conditions. Instead of reacting defensively, she acknowledged the crisis and spoke of the national emergency of our high child mortality rates. This is how accountable political leaders should act when the media or civil society exposes governance problems. President Mbeki, on the other hand, as well as the Minister of Health, have acted defensively and attacked the integrity of the Daily Dispatch.

(See these webpages for more on the Frere Hospital incident:
http://www.dispatch.co.za/2007/07/23/Easterncape/aalead.html
http://www.dispatch.co.za/2007/07/23/Easterncape/ababe2.html
http://www.dispatch.co.za/2007/07/23/Easterncape/ababe3.html
http://www.dispatch.co.za/2006/09/01/Easterncape/cris.html)
The Spanish trip

On Tuesday 7 August, several newspapers reported that the Deputy-Minister flew to Spain at the state's expense of R160,000 on business class accompanied by her advisor and her son. The trip was apparently taken without the President' s permission. The TAC has investigated the facts of this incident and determined the following:

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The Deputy-Minister travelled to Spain to participate in a meeting of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI). The trip therefore involved her carrying out valid business duties.
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Government policy allows ministers and deputy-ministers to be accompanied by one member of family when travelling internationally. This is common practice and allowed by government policy. There was therefore nothing improper about the Deputy-Minister's son accompanying her. It is telling that this fact went unmentioned in, for example, the Business Day article that reported this incident.
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It is standard for ministers and their accompanying entourage to fly business class. We have learnt that only two of the three tickets were in business class.
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The Deputy-Minister applied for permission from the President to travel to Spain, as is required by protocol. This should have been a formality. Apparently there was some administrative confusion and the Deputy-Minister believed that permission had been or would be granted when she embarked on the trip. There was no good reason for the President to refuse permission, as the Deputy-Minister was carrying out her duties. Yet the President did refuse permission. The Deputy-Minister, immediately upon learning this, returned to South Africa, without attending the IAVI meeting. She has also apologised for the breach of protocol.

This is where this trivial incident should have been left. Instead, it was leaked to the media in a distorted manner aimed at discrediting the Deputy-Minister. This raises the concern that the Deputy-Minister's trip to Spain was refused in order to discredit her and that this is an orchestrated attempt to justify dismissing her. This is the second time President Mbeki has attempted to dismiss her and resorted to unfounded allegations of misconduct to justify it.

The President's legally irrational, unreasonable and arbitrary demand is an abuse of a constitutionally mandated power. The Treatment Action Campaign calls on all our allies to join in asking the President to show a degree of courage by meeting all of us to answer the questions: Can our country trust you on HIV/AIDS as more than 900 people a day continue to die? Can our Deputy-President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka continue to lead us with your support? Our country has waited, vacillated, hoped, pained and fought too long over HIV/AIDS. This weekend TAC will consult with our allies across the country to prepare joint protest action including possible legal action on all the delays related to the agreed National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS. Our best defence of the Deputy-Minister is to end HIV/AIDS

denialism.

She is the best person currently to restore the credibility and competence of the National Department of Health. We urge President Mbeki to revoke his decision and to unequivocally voice his support for her. This is the only sensible course of action that he could take if he is truly concerned about the health of millions of poor people in South Africa. Women's Day 9 August 2007 will be remembered as the day when a heroic woman took a principled stand in defence of life, dignity and health. We salute the Deputy-Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge.

- Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge
- Thabo Mbeki

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