

THE SUNDAY TIMES AND THE REDEFINITION OF THE FUNDAMENTALS OF JOURNALISM

The Presidency has noted today's front page article of the Sunday Times headlined: "Mbeki took R30-million and gave some to Zuma".

The report which purports to be a result of a six months' investigation is but a hotchpotch recycling of allegations that have from time to time been peddled against the government's Strategic Defence Procurement Package.

This time the Sunday Times outdoes itself by placing a spurious allegation in the public domain, i.e. President Thabo Mbeki received a bribe of R30 million from MAN Ferrostaal.

The Presidency would like to place it on record that President Thabo Mbeki has never at any stage received any amount of money from MAN Ferrostaal. The Sunday Times or anyone who has evidence that the President or anyone else received bribe(s) in the procurement process should, as we have emphasised before, approach the law enforcement agencies.

In this regard, we recall the findings of the joint investigation into Strategic Defence Procurement Package which found no evidence of "any improper or unlawful conduct by the Government." In their joint-statement of November 15, 2001, the investigators (the Auditor-General, National Director of Public Prosecutions and the Public Protector) said, amongst other things:

"No evidence was found of any improper or unlawful conduct by the Government. The irregularities and improprieties referred to in our report, point to the conduct of certain officials of the government departments involved and cannot, in our view, be attributed to the President or the Ministers involved in their capacity as members of the Ministers' Committee or Cabinet. There are therefore no grounds to suggest that the Government's contracting position is flawed."

While all South Africans await the evidence, which the paper should submit to the law enforcement agencies, the Sunday Times is challenged to explain, amongst others:

- The name of the UK specialist risk consultancy which authored the report on which the paper supposedly based its article and the reason for their concealment of the consultancy's name.
- Its reliance on a "leading Central European manufacturer" which commissioned the consultancy to investigate the purported "questionable business practices" of MAN Ferrostaal in order to fend off MAN Ferrostaal's attempted "hostile takeover bid against it". By the way, the mystique attached to this information starts to ring hollow given that information about these competitors is easily available on the internet. In other words, what is meant to be a "six-months investigation" by the Sunday Times turns out to be peddling of information among competing companies, including in its own words, "[a] number of arms dealers who were involved in bidding for the [South African] contracts...."
- Its grotesque allegation that Zuma acted as Mbeki's "front man during the arms deal negotiations", particularly in the context of the court process currently under way.
- Whereas the article acknowledges that it is based on allegations, the paper's editorial ("The arms-deal truth must out, once and for all") openly attaches "truth" to the allegations. The unstated premise of the editorial is that the allegations are "truthful" because the Sunday Times says so. Rational South Africans will surely find this logic flawed!

The recycling exercise in which the Sunday Times indulges is made manifest by repetition of a string of allegations. These include the supposed tampering with the Attorney General's Report, changing the terms of the procurement bids, the viability of the Coega project and President Mbeki's alleged "brushing aside" of warnings of the Strategic Defence Procurement Package unaffordability – all of which have long been in the public domain! The allegation that President Mbeki received money for the ANC is also an old one embellished in this current version with fanciful figures.

There is an additional reason why professionals and society ought to worry about The Sunday Times' brand of journalism as illustrated by the article in question. This relates to the paper's seeming enthusiastic voyage to re-writing the fundamentals of journalism.

By readily regurgitating known and spurious allegations – supposedly after six months of a laborious investigation – while at the same time concealing easy-to-find information which casts doubt on the credibility of its article, the paper appears to be pursuing an agenda that it only can explain.

The danger exists that journalism – which plays an important role in any democracy – may ultimately become a "rumour industry" in which any and every allegation finds its way in the pages of newspapers; thus stripping the profession of the legitimacy that it must enjoy in pursuit of its role.

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