

MEDIA STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND FISHERIES, Ms TINA JOEMAT-PETTERSSON, MP

Immediate Release

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Setting the record straight on hotel accommodation

Since last week I have been the subject of persistent and most vicious negative media reporting following my reply to a parliamentary question about my hotel accommodation since my appointment as Minister in May 2009.

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Daff) provided information that was not explained and contextualised to parliament last month about my hotel stays in Cape Town and Pretoria between May 2009 and June 2011.

I have invited you, members of the media, to this briefing this morning in order to set the record straight, once and for all, hoping that this matter will finally be laid to rest.

Some of the entries in the parliamentary reply provided to me by officials in the department included meetings that I held in the hotels with stakeholders, where refreshments and food were served, over the past two-and-a-half years. Everything was captured as bed and meals instead of venues for meeting purposes and banqueting.

An investigation is currently underway to establish how the information was compiled, and the outcome of that investigation will determine the way forward. I have been cast as an extravagant Minister who willy-nilly splurges on luxury hotels using taxpayers' money, and has scant regard for the millions of South Africans who live in abject poverty.

I signed off on the Parliamentary reply after reading it. A human error occurred for which I apologise, from which we have all learnt.

It is important to provide a brief background about my accommodation that has aroused so much unnecessary controversy in some quarters for about two weeks.

My dignity has been impaired and my character impugned by opportunists who sought to score cheap political points about my hotel accommodation.

I was appointed on May 29 2009 as Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and relocated from Kimberley, Northern Cape, to hotels in Pretoria and Cape Town because the Department of Public Works (DPW), whose responsibility it is to provide accommodation to Ministers, was not ready to provide me with official accommodation.

Since there was no proper official accommodation for me in Pretoria and Cape Town, I had to leave my children behind in Kimberley, with family members, as I am a single mother.

Cape Town

I moved into an official house at Groote Schuur Estate, Rondebosch, provided by DPW on 17 July 2009, and immediately assumed occupancy of that house, despite the house having chronic defects, which included broken toilets, bathrooms and a roof that threatened to collapse. I could not relocate my children from Kimberley because the house was dilapidated, but I nevertheless stayed in that house.

During that period DPW promised to renovate the house, but by January 2010 the house had still not been renovated. I eventually relocated my children since the separation between mother and children had become intolerable and unsustainable.

After a freak accident in the kitchen floor when the tiles popped up, I was instructed by DPW to move out of the house and relocate to a hotel because the house had become unsafe for human habitation. I refused to move to a hotel.

I lived in that dilapidated house at Groote Schuur Estate until September 2010.

I moved out of that house into a rented one, also in Rondebosch, (rented by Daff) in September 2010, but DPW refused to facilitate the move even though they were responsible for my accommodation. I was even denied domestic help which I am entitled to as a Minister. I still live in that rented house.

We were at loggerheads because DPW wanted me to move with the children to a hotel, and I wanted a rented house.

I have lived in this rented house for one full year without any assistance from Public Works.

Ironically, a year later, at the beginning of October 2011, DPW officials went to view the house, by which time I had already fixed a lot of defects out of my own pocket.

I paid for electricity, water, garden and pool services for the whole year out of my own pocket and had to claim the expenses I incurred from Daff, certain claims of which they have refused to pay.

If I had followed the instruction of the DPW to relocate to a hotel while they were mulling over renovating the house, I would have spent an extra full year in a hotel with my children. Instead, I chose to rent a house which until the beginning of October this year I paid for, and still battle to this day to reclaim some of the expenses I had incurred.

Coincidentally, after the story of my accommodation broke last week, I have been informed that renovations on my previous house had started in earnest.

I stayed only *once* in a hotel after being allocated official accommodation when our department hosted the Vulnerable Farm Workers' Summit in Somerset West in July 2010. I stayed overnight in a hotel in Stellenbosch.

Pretoria

I initially stayed in a hotel, but requested to be moved to a guest because I felt it was too expensive to stay in a hotel when it became apparent that DPW was in no rush to provide me with a house in Pretoria.

I moved into a guest house in Johannesburg, and one evening when I came back from work I found that my bags had been packed up and put in a storeroom. When we enquired why I was being kicked out of the guest house, we were informed that there was a prior booking for the FIFA 2010 World Cup, which South Africa hosted, between June and July last year.

Officials from the department frantically looked for accommodation while my children and I slept in the car. When they eventually found a room for me, my children, the nanny and I had to share a bed in one room.

Officials from our department eventually found accommodation for me in a guest house in Johannesburg – the one that has sparked controversy.

During that period I suffered a foot injury. I was wheelchair-bound and had to walk with the aid of crutches, when I was not on a wheelchair.

I was accommodated in that guest house together with my protector as she helped me physically to execute my duties while I received occupational treatment. My temporary disability notwithstanding, I still executed my official duties.

I met with various stakeholders in that guest house, amongst others, the Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU), Auditor-General, the CEO of the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the IDT. During these meetings, refreshments were served.

I stayed for almost 16 months in a hotel and guest houses in Johannesburg before I could be provided with official accommodation in Pretoria.

It is important to mention that when Parliament is on recess, Ministers do not take a holiday, as one Gauteng newspaper asked what was I doing in Gauteng when Parliament was on recess and there were no Cabinet meetings and the President was out of the country. The work of government continues even when Parliament is on recess and when the President is out of the country.

After my parliamentary reply caused a storm, especially about the cost of around R420 000 spent on the controversial guest house – hitherto unbeknown to me - I inquired from my officials what had led to them spending such an obscene amount of money on an ordinary guest house, they explained to me that all accommodation had been fully booked and that the guest house had been block-booked by a foreign company for the duration of the World Cup, and thus they had to pay an inflated amount to secure it.

I did not know that the department was paying the guest house an astronomical amount of money, especially after I had asked that I be booked in a guest house to avoid the high cost of a hotel.

Needless to say, Ministers do not approve accommodation.

The booking of that guest house had absolutely nothing to do with the World Cup, contrary to some media reports.

Ultimately, officials from Daff identified a property in Waterkloof, Pretoria East - which is a function of DPW - and I assumed occupancy of that house during the last week of September 2010. I still live in that house.

Ever since I was allocated official accommodation in Pretoria I have never stayed in a hotel. We have noted the comments attributed to the DA's Lourie Bosman in today's media in which he alleged that I stayed at the Sheraton Hotel in April and May this year.

This is not true. I have hosted meetings at the Sheraton, including the MinMEC and the African Ambassadors in preparation for the African Ministerial Conference on Climate-Smart Agriculture which we co-hosted with the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in September in Johannesburg.

The Democratic Alliance is well within its rights to approach the Public Protector to lodge a complaint about my accommodation. I will fully cooperate with the probe and I am confident that I will be exonerated.

As far as we are concerned this matter is now closed.

Enquiries: Selby Bokaba: Media Liaison Officer
Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
Tel: 012 319-7876
082 778 0245

