

SARS 'rogue agency' claims may not be far-fetched

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Former special forces operative Mike Peega's dossier claiming that the South African Revenue Service (SARS) ran a rogue unit targeting politicians and businessmen close to President Jacob Zuma in 2007 was easily discredited at the time.



SARS has been accused of running a rogue unit to spy on prominent politicians and business people. Image: SARS

Peega was fired from SARS after evidence came to light that he'd been involved in rhino poaching. His revelations were dismissed as a smear campaign by a disgruntled employee.

When he was arrested for rhino poaching in December 2008, Peega had been working for a secretive SARS unit officially known as the National Research Group (NRG), which was covertly investigating trafficking of drugs, cars, abalone, cigarettes and rhino horns.

In his defence he claimed he'd been taking part in an officially sanctioned sting operation, but SARS denied this.

Peega's dossier began to circulate in November 2009 but SARS responded swiftly by issuing a briefing document refuting his claims. The notion that SARS was running a rogue spy unit was consigned to the dustbin of fabrication.

But a lover's quarrel earlier this year brought new evidence to light suggesting that not all of Peega's claims were far-fetched.

Evidence, in the form of WhatsApp exchanges between SARS Enforcement Head Johann van Loggerenberg and his former lover Belinda Walter, supported her sworn statements in court proceedings that the revenue service was gathering illegal covert intelligence.

WhatsApp messages

In his WhatsApp messages Van Loggerenberg refers extensively to SARS phone and mail interceptions, including references to "running plenty of lines", "watcher and listener ladies" and targets changing their "phones and e-mails" because they "know how I operate".

At 4.17am on 1 March this year Van Loggerenberg and Walter discussed an article set to appear in the Sunday Tribune. Minutes later Van Loggerenberg sent Walter an e-mail written by reporter Amanda Khoza to tobacco company owner Adriano Mazotti. When Walter asks Van Loggerenberg: "How do you know this?" he replies: "Intercepted."



SARS operated a clandestine unit tasked with monitoring contraband including rhino horn, abalone and illegal cigarettes. Image: [Annanticus](#)

At the time Walter represented tobacco company owners being investigated by Van Loggerenberg.

SARS has repeatedly sought to discredit Walter.

Van Loggerenberg initially complained that he was a victim of another rogue unit run by elements from the South African intelligence community that wanted to destroy him for probing the tobacco industry and high-profile tax dodgers.

But this week, after first claiming the WhatsApp messages had been tampered with, Van Loggerenberg said through SARS

spokesman Adrian Lackay that he'd "deliberately lied to his girlfriend at the time" for reasons that he would disclose to investigators.

Further evidence

However, in a two-month investigation Sunday Times reporters have gathered further evidence suggesting SARS was engaged in illegal covert intelligence gathering.

This evidence includes interviews with SARS officials, internal memos, e-mails, minutes of unit meetings and a National Intelligence Agency report which confirmed that the SARS unit's activities included "surveillance activities, house infiltrations and comprehensive security checks on the identified targets", including "Fikile Mbalula, Fana Hlongwane etc".



SARS says the claims and allegations being made against it are simply part of a smear campaign.
Image: SARS

In his dossier, Peega said an employee, known as Skollie, "was fired but not before he threatened to expose the unit and was offered a 'silence cheque' and the unit members warned to cut all ties and communication with him."

He claims the unit was given a list of "tax offenders" as "targets", including former ANC Youth League president and now EFF Leader Julius Malema, Sports Minister Fikile Mbalula, ANC spokesman Zizi Kodwa and businessman Fana Hlongwane. Malema, Mbalula and Hlongwane confirmed that they'd been aware their movements were being watched by unknown people at the time. Kodwa said he hadn't been aware of being followed.

Approached for comment, Peega said: "All I am saying is SARS must prove I am lying rather than treat me as a disgruntled employee. I am willing to go to prison if they can prove with facts that I am lying. SARS is a big organisation and I am a non-entity. If I have brought them into disrepute why are they not taking me to the cleaners?"

This week Lackay again dismissed Peega's dossier as a "smear campaign".

"SARS is aware that Mr Peega recently rejuvenated his old allegations in conjunction with certain other persons, who all have their own nefarious agendas to discredit SARS. SARS has instructed its attorneys to advise it on its rights in relation to smear campaigns by Peega and others as this potentially endangers the public confidence in the integrity of SARS," he said.

Source: Sunday Times via I-Net Bridge

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