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21 Apr

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Thabo Bester had an earlier escape plan, new evidence suggests – with a different decoy body

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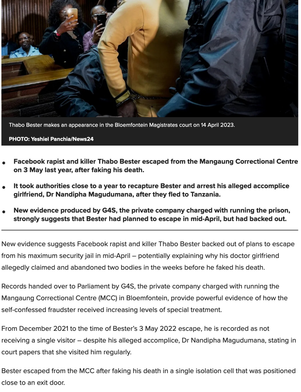


Thabo Bester makes an appearance in the Bloemfontein Magistrates court on 14 April 2023.

PHOTO: Yeshiel Panchia/News24

- **Facebook rapist and killer Thabo Bester escaped from the Mangaung Correctional Centre on 3 May last year, after faking his death.**
- **It took authorities close to a year to recapture Bester and arrest his alleged accomplice girlfriend, Dr Nandipha Magudumana, after they fled to Tanzania.**
- **New evidence produced by G4S, the private company charged with running the prison, strongly suggests that Bester had planned to escape in mid-April, but had backed out.**

New evidence suggests Facebook rapist and killer Thabo Bester backed out of plans to escape from his maximum security jail in mid-April – potentially explaining why his doctor girlfriend allegedly claimed and abandoned two bodies in the weeks before he faked his death.

Records handed over to Parliament by G4S, the private company charged with running the Mangaung Correctional Centre (MCC) in Bloemfontein, provide powerful evidence of how the self-confessed fraudster received increasing levels of special treatment.

From December 2021 to the time of Bester's 3 May 2022 escape, he is recorded as not receiving a single visitor – despite his alleged accomplice, Dr Nandipha Magudumana, stating in court papers that she visited him regularly.

Bester escaped from the MCC after faking his death in a single isolation cell that was positioned close to an exit door.

Documents handed over by G4S and its subcontractor Integritron Integrated Systems (IIS) have now revealed that the technology used to log the movements in and out of the MCC cells – including the isolation cell Bester had asked to be moved to for his "own safety" on 30 April 2022 – was not working.

This means that there is no data for the "cell call and door" audits over the period during which Bester escaped.

A register produced by G4S now also shows that Bester asked to be placed in isolation on 15 April 2022, two days after he reportedly booked Magudumana into an upmarket Bloemfontein hotel within driving distance of the prison.

He cancelled that isolation request on 17 April, two days later.

During that period, however, power to the digital video recorders (DVRs) that could have captured Bester's escape was inexplicably cut.

In one instance, this power cut happened at the exact same time of day that the cables supplying power to those CCTV recorders were pulled on the day of Bester's escape.

In evidence submitted to Parliament, IIS, a security systems company, recorded that power interruptions had resulted in its DVRs not recording at 19:37 on 14 April 2022 and 19:38 the following day.

When Bester escaped, power to the DVRs that would have recorded his escape was cut at 19:38 and only restored at 04:11 – exactly the same time as these previous power cuts.

Other power cuts to these recorders were registered on 16 April 2022 at 05:36 and 07:58, 19 April at 14:32, 28 April at 19:10 and 29 April at 17:43.

READ | Inside Thabo Bester's prison records: How he turned a maximum security jail into his personal empire

ISS CCTV technician Teboho Lipholo, who is now facing charges of aiding and abetting Bester's escape, is alleged to have admitted to a translator tasked with assisting him during a polygraph test that he deliberately cut power to the recorders.

During the polygraph test, Lipholo denied that he had played any part in Bester's escape but was found to have shown signs of dishonesty.

That test, which has no legal status in South Africa's courts, found that Lipholo "displayed SIGNIFICANT indication of deception. It is the opinion of the polygraph examiner that Teboho Lipholo was NOT truthful concerning the issue being examined."

This was in response to specific questions about whether he had sabotaged the recording equipment, helped Bester to escape or "benefitted financially" from that escape.

Meanwhile, the Sunday Times previously reported that Magudumana falsely claimed two bodies as being relatives of hers from a Bloemfontein hospital and state mortuary in early April – days before Bester moved himself to the solitary cells from which he eventually escaped.

The police have declined to provide any dates for when these fraudulent body claims occurred, on the basis that this is the subject of an ongoing investigation.

According to SABC, one of the bodies Magudumana is alleged to have fraudulently claimed was found in a river on 29 April, shortly before Bester escaped – a strong indication that the unidentified man's remains were intended to serve as a decoy in an earlier escape attempt.

G4S admits that on that same day an unauthorised vehicle came onto MCC grounds, in what authorities now believe was an operation to drop off the body used to fake Bester's death.

According to the Judicial Inspectorate of Correctional Services' Justice Edwin Cameron, it was Magudumana's repeated claiming of bodies that caused police to block her urgent legal bid to access the body that was found burnt beyond recognition in Bester's cell.

Magudumana was supported in that court application, which Cameron says contains at least 10 instances where she lied under oath, by her father Zolile Sekeleni – who is now facing charges alongside her.

Sekeleni endorsed Magudumana's claims that she was entitled to Bester's body because she became his "customary wife" in late 2020 (despite being married to another man at the time).

In a sworn statement, he gave a detailed account of his role in his daughter's lobola negotiations with Bester's uncle David Magagula, who has since died.

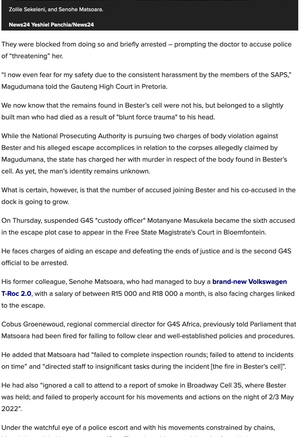
"After a lengthy discussion and negotiations, we agreed that the lobola would be 12 cows, which will amount to R60 000 in cash.

"I was surprised Mr Magagula went outside for a few minutes and then came back with the money together with two bottles of brandy. We counted the money in the presence of Mr Magagula and indeed [it] was R60 000 in cash. The lobola was concluded," Sekeleni's affidavit states.

> **We then discussed the issue of handing over my daughter to the family. Due to the fact that their son, which is my son-in-law, was in prison serving a sentence we then decided that the handover will be done upon his release from prison.**

Given that Bester had been sentenced to an effective life sentence for raping two women and murdering a third, he would only have become eligible for parole in 2037.

In her court application to access the body found in Bester's cell, Magudumana claimed that it was her father and one of her employees who had tried to collect the remains from a funeral home so that she could conduct an autopsy on the body and then bury it.



Zolile Sekeleni, and Senohe Matsoara.

News24 Yeshiel Panchia/News24

They were blocked from doing so and briefly arrested – prompting the doctor to accuse police of "threatening" her.

"I now even fear for my safety due to the consistent harassment by the members of the SAPS," Magudumana told the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria.

We now know that the remains found in Bester's cell were not his, but belonged to a slightly built man who had died as a result of "blunt force trauma" to his head.

While the National Prosecuting Authority is pursuing two charges of body violation against Bester and his alleged escape accomplices in relation to the corpses allegedly claimed by Magudumana, the state has charged her with murder in respect of the body found in Bester's cell. As yet, the man's identity remains unknown.

What is certain, however, is that the number of accused joining Bester and his co-accused in the dock is going to grow.

On Thursday, suspended G4S "custody officer" Motanyane Masukela became the sixth accused in the escape plot case to appear in the Free State Magistrate's Court in Bloemfontein.

He faces charges of aiding an escape and defeating the ends of justice and is the second G4S official to be arrested.

His former colleague, Senohe Matsoara, who had managed to buy a **brand-new Volkswagen T-Roc 2.0**, with a salary of between R15 000 and R18 000 a month, is also facing charges linked to the escape.

Cobus Groenewoud, regional commercial director for G4S Africa, previously told Parliament that Matsoara had been fired for failing to follow clear and well-established policies and procedures.

He added that Matsoara had "failed to complete inspection rounds; failed to attend to incidents on time" and "directed staff to insignificant tasks during the incident [the fire in Bester's cell]".

He had also "ignored a call to attend to a report of smoke in Broadway Cell 35, where Bester was held; and failed to properly account for his movements and actions on the night of 2/3 May 2022".

Under the watchful eye of a police escort and with his movements constrained by chains, Masukela, ambled into courtroom 18 on Thursday with a surprising air of nonchalance.

G4S has confirmed that he's been suspended over allegations of wrongdoing linked to the escape – specifically in relation to the arrival of an unauthorised car on the MCC grounds on 29 April 2022, days before Bester's escape.

In Parliament, Groenewoud revealed that G4S had suspended seven other officials over the presence of that vehicle, which is strongly suspected to be the way in which the body used to fake Bester's death was brought into the prison.

The Sally Port gate that the car drove through is a controlled access point to the prison where a vehicle must pass through in order to enter a second gate into the facility.

It went through these barriers unchecked and delivered a TV stand to the prison's skills development department for repairs, but it was never repaired, G4S risk and audit director Gert Beyleveld admitted.

DA MP Glynnis Breytenbach then asked: "Could a corpse have fitted in that TV stand?"

Beyleveld responded: "I think so, yes".

The cabinet was later taken by the police.

Social media posts depict Masukela clad in his uniform at the visitors' entrance to the prison, alongside his partner and child at home, as well as posing next to his car.

He has opted for a Legal Aid lawyer and is scheduled to appear in court again on 3 May.