

South African Energy minister insists on nuclear

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Committee demands clarity on costs but gets none

By Suné Payne



Parliament of South Africa. Photo: Brent Meersman

The new Minister of Energy, David Mahlobo, appears determined to push ahead with nuclear procurement at an unspecified future date. This is despite the Minister of Finance announcing categorically in the October Medium Term Budget Policy Statement that the country could not afford a nuclear programme and does not have the money to fund one. Also, in April, the Cape High Court ruled that the pending nuclear deal with Russia was “unlawful and unconstitutional”. But Mahlobo insists a nuclear deal is on the cards.

Addressing the Portfolio Committee on Energy for about two hours on Tuesday, Mahlobo said South Africa is “blessed with uranium that could be extracted for nuclear power”. He told the Committee that the country needs nuclear energy and it remained part of South Africa’s future energy plans.

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Opponents of nuclear energy could not wish it away, he said. Mahlobo envisages nuclear energy growing to provide as much as 20% of South Africa's energy by 2030.

While Mahlobo tried to convince MPs that the way forward for energy policy was a "mix" of renewable and non-renewable sources, Committee members fired questions at him demanding clarity.

As to whether a deal was already underway, he would say only that there is no nuclear deal on the table at present, but referred to a tender valued at R100 billion. He said the initial proposed budget of R1 trillion was "not my figure", but made it clear that a nuclear deal in the future was inevitable.

This raised the ire of committee members who wanted clarity on nuclear plans.

"I want the minister to explain this R1 trillion issue once and for all," demanded Zukisa Faku (ANC). Gordon Mackay (DA) told the Committee that the Minister "better damn well explain why we need nuclear". Mackay questioned why when the former energy minister Dipuo Peters had declared a nuclear deal unaffordable, plans to restart the nuclear programme had been revived after a cabinet reshuffle that put Mahlobo in charge. He described the nuclear programme as "shrouded in mystery".

Mahlobo was until recently the Minister of State Security.

Gavin Davies (DA) said the Energy Minister had failed to give an update on the nuclear build programme, and he wanted to know the costs, updates and affordability of nuclear power.

"[Finance] Minister Gigaba said it is unaffordable," said Davies. "Do you disagree with your Finance Minister? Where will the money come from?"

Dr Blade Nzimande (ANC) expressed concern about how the costs involved would impact on the poor. Rismati Mavunda (ANC) wanted to know from the Minister how nuclear energy would provide poverty relief. Jan Esterhuizen (IFP) asked the Minister, "How can it be financially justifiable to start a nuclear programme? How will we be able to afford it?"

Mahlobo gave no clear answer to these questions from MPs, answering only, "when the time comes, we will make a plan."

Chairperson of the Committee Fikile Mahola (ANC) said the Committee needed "absolute clarity" not only for themselves, but also for the public. Mahola said the Committee had called this meeting specifically to deal with this matter.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday protesters gathered first at St George's Mall where they had invited political parties to take part in a public debate on nuclear energy for South Africa. Only Cope and UDM attended and both parties spoke out against any nuclear deal.

Citizens from as far afield as the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and the Karoo took part in the protest march to Parliament which followed.

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