

# Media Statement



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**TO : ALL MEDIA**

**DATE : 31 JANUARY 2018**

**RE : COPPER THEFT SYNDICATE SENTENCED TO LENTHY JAIL TERMS**

The Free State High Court sitting in Harrismith has sentenced six men to sentences ranging from 16 years to 23 years imprisonment after they were convicted of being involved in the commission of copper cable theft that was committed between August 2016 and November 2016 in Harrismith and Kestell.

Judge Corne van Zyl sentenced Sithembiso Mkhonazi (32), Richard Mhlanga (45), Lucky Vilakazi (24), Bonginkosi Dlanjwa (35), Ephraim Phakathi (33) and Bob Khoza (34) after she had found them guilty of one count of managing the operation of an enterprise through a pattern of racketeering activity; one count of participating in the activities of an enterprise through a pattern of racketeering activity; 15 counts of tampering or destroying essential infrastructure and 15 counts of theft of non-ferrous which forms part of essential infrastructure.

Judge van Zyl sentenced Mkhwanazi to 23 years imprisonment. Dlanjwa and Mhanga were sentenced to 19 years and 17 years in prison, respectively. The other three accused, Vilakazi, Phakathi and Khoza were each sentenced to 16 years imprisonment for their crimes.

In November 2016, the security officers from Combined Private Investigations, a company contracted by Eskom, arrested four of the accused after they found them busy cutting copper. The fifth accused was arrested in Kestell while sitting in a car that was supposed to be used to load the stolen copper cables. The sixth accused was arrested later after cell phone records showed that he was involved in the commission of these crimes.

During the investigation, it was revealed that Mkhwanazi rented a vehicle from Pule Diteho. The vehicle had a tracker device installed and it placed the vehicle at some of the crime scenes during the time it was rented out to Mkhwanazi. The State Prosecutor, Advocate Sandile Mthethwa relied on the evidence provided by the eye witnesses, pointing out, cell phone records and the tracker report to prove the case beyond reasonable doubt. The accused operated as a syndicated

and the timeline analysis of their cell phone data showed that they travelled from their respective places of residence in Kwa-Thema and Tsakane in Gauteng Province to the relevant crime scenes and back to their residences after the commission of the crimes.

In aggravation of sentence advocate Mthethwa called Anton Nel, an employee of Eskom who told the court that the pylon structures were damaged and could not be re-used after the incidents of theft and had to be re-strung with new conductor material at the cost of R12.5 million.

The NPA welcomes the sentence.

Kind Regards,

**Phaladi Shuping**

**Regional Spokesperson: DPP Free State**

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