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South Africa's high commissioner to Singapore is a convicted drug trafficker who was fired from SAA after being jailed in New York for smuggling a bag of cocaine.

Fifty-five-year-old Hazel Francis Ngubeni spent two years in a US prison between 1999 and 2001, but did not disclose her conviction when she was nominated for the diplomatic post in 2013.

During a vetting process by the State Security Agency, she claimed she did not have a criminal record.

Ngubeni admitted the conviction to the Sunday Times this week - but claimed she had been wrongfully jailed after a "strange bag was found in my luggage".

This was not her first brush with the law involving drug trafficking.

The Sunday Times has established that Ngubeni was also arrested on September 20 1995 at OR Tambo International Airport and charged with smuggling 9kg of heroin into South Africa from Thailand.

During both incidents, she was employed as a cabin attendant for SAA.

A fellow cabin crew member, who worked with Ngubeni at the time and asked not to be named, claimed Ngubeni had asked him to carry one of her bags into South Africa. Unbeknown to him, drugs were stashed in a false compartment.

The pair were acquitted in January 1997 after a key witness, reported to be a Mozambican diplomat, refused to testify against Ngubeni.

International relations experts have slated Ngubeni.

"The fact that she might not have revealed this during vetting raises serious questions about her integrity and therefore her fitness for the high office of a diplomat," said international relations expert Professor Siphamandla Zondi of the University of Pretoria's political science department.

"If confirmed, she would need to be recalled immediately and stripped of her diplomatic status. She should not be deployed elsewhere, she must be fired."

SAA confirmed this week that Ngubeni, who at the time went by the name Francis MacDonald, was fired after her arrest in New York.

"She was arrested, convicted and sent to jail, which made her unable to render any service to her employer," spokesman Tlali Tlali said.

God forgive us all! Diplomats are vetted to verify as to what extent would they become a liability to our country. I was made to believe that we have one of the highest security checks

A senior SAA manager said a human resource official flew to the US to hand-deliver her dismissal letter after her conviction.

"We could not have fired her if she was not convicted. It would have been illegal."

A former SAA senior manager at the time of Ngubeni's arrest in New York said the airline had commissioned her to approach Ngubeni's lawyer to seek permission to do an interview with her

for a 25-minute in-house video. The point of the video would be to expose "the consequences of drug smuggling".

The request was declined.

Confronted with the allegations yesterday, Ngubeni initially refused to comment, saying "Do what you need to do without my input", before hanging up. After more detailed questions were sent, and she was confronted with the confirmation from SAA, Ngubeni asked the Sunday Times to hold off on the story until October 17 when she could give an interview in person.

She refused to answer specific questions, instead volunteering information about her father - who was part of the liberation movement. Pressed further, she admitted she had been arrested at OR Tambo in 1995. She had been "implicated because I had asked a colleague to carry my bags", she said. "Unbeknown to me he was given another bag by someone I knew," she said.

Alerted to the conviction, Department of International Relations spokesman Nelson Kgwete said the department would "look into all the matters ... and will work with all relevant state agencies to establish facts. The security vetting process for all our diplomats is a process that the relevant agencies are constantly reviewing with the intention of improving to avoid gaps and discrepancies."

Ngubeni left South Africa for Singapore on April 17 2013 and her security clearance was issued three months later, on July 21 2013.

A senior source at the department said that Ngubeni would never have been deployed had she declared her criminal record.

Records at the department note that Ngubeni was nominated to her position by "senior political leadership".

On a welcome note on the high commission's website homepage, Ngubeni says the commission is committed to promoting South Africa's values.

At a recent Freedom Day event in Singapore, she spoke of the increasing number of high-level political and business visits taking place between Singapore and South Africa .

Zondi said the violation of the ethics of diplomatic conduct "can cause serious damage both to the stature of the profession of diplomacy and South Africa's stature. It does a lot more harm to us as a country than we realise and it erodes the trust in diplomatic immunity."

Another international relations and foreign policy expert, who asked not to be named, said the revelation was shocking.

"God forgive us all! Diplomats are vetted to verify as to what extent would they become a liability to our country. I was made to believe that we have one of the highest security checks."

The expert said the credentials of diplomats on missions abroad were sent to the receiving country to scrutinise.

"In most cases, they accept our diplomats as presented to them, but there are a lot of things happening behind closed doors when some stuff like this ... about this high commissioner are discovered . . . but they can't be discussed in public to avoid a diplomatic row."

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