

Timeline of GroundUp's investigation into the Thabo Bester saga

3 April 2023

On Tuesday 4 April 2023, Members of Parliament will be asking questions of various state representatives about the Thabo Bester saga. We are publishing this ahead of the parliamentary session so that both MPs and the public have GroundUp's perspective on how this story unfolded. This is not a comprehensive document. Many other sources, not listed here, and other state institutions were contacted in the course of our investigation.

All GroundUp reports on the Thabo Bester saga are available here:

<https://www.groundup.org.za/topic/thabo-bester-prison-escape/>

24 October 2022: GroundUp editor Nathan Geffen was given information that called into question the official explanation of what happened to Thabo Bester. At this point Geffen was highly sceptical of the claim that Bester had escaped, but felt there was enough that wasn't done properly in the investigation to put a reporter onto the story.

A key focus of our work at this point was to establish whether Bester had died by suicide or if he had been murdered, and to find out why a confirmed DNA identification was taking so long. We had one reporter, Marecia Damons, working on the story, in between several others, and much of her effort went into finding out about the DNA testing backlog. GroundUp Senior reporter James Stent also assisted.

25 October: Damons emailed the Department of Correctional Services spokesperson Singabakho Nxumalo asking about the status of the investigation into the fire of 3 May. There was no immediate response.

Damons emailed questions to G4S with similar questions. We received a response stating that G4S could not comment for contractual reasons.

Damons sent similar questions to the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS). JICS spokesperson Emarentia Cupido gave a detailed response the following day which was included in our report.

27 October: Damons sent a follow-up email to DCS spokesperson Nxumalo. He responded by standing by DCS's 3 May statement that Bester had died in his cell.

28 October: Damons emailed DCS spokesperson Nxumalo asking how DCS could claim the body was Bester when the DNA results had **not been confirmed**. Damons also asked why the investigation was not yet complete. She also asked if the autopsy was finished, and where

the corpse was. (At this stage we did not have the autopsy, even though we later learnt it had been completed shortly after the fire. We were however aware that the autopsy had been completed and that the body was dead before the fire broke out.) We received no response.

28 October: Damons sent similar questions to JICS spokesperson Emarentia Cupido. She responded on 31 March and to the extent that her response was relevant, it was included in our report.

1 November: Damons followed up with DCS spokesperson Nxumalo, via email and WhatsApp, but received no response.

2 November: Damons sent questions to SAPS Free State (Brigadier Motantsi Makhele) asking whether DNA samples had been taken. We received a response that DNA samples were taken from the body after the fire, the matter was considered urgent and an outcome was imminent.

3 November: Damons followed up with DCS spokesperson Nxumalo via email but received no response.

7 November: Damons followed up with DCS spokesperson Nxumalo via email but received no response.

8 November: We published our first story [Many mysteries surround the death of 'Facebook rapist' Thabo Bester](#)

This is the gist of it:

“Six months on, the circumstances surrounding his death are still murky.

Investigations launched during May by DCS, the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS) are not complete. JICS' investigation relies on documents from other governmental departments.

Basic questions still do not have answers:

How could a fire start in an isolation cell?

What was the cause of death - did the person die before the fire?

Whose body was found in the cell?

GroundUp can reveal that even DNA testing on the body found in the cell has not been completed.”

Importantly, we also wrote:

“At this stage the possibilities are

1. the body is Bester’s and he killed himself by fire;
2. it is Bester and he died in an accidental fire;
3. it is Bester and he died in a fire set by someone else;
4. it is Bester and he was murdered before the fire; or
5. **it was not Bester who died, and Bester might have escaped.**

Possibility 5 is the most unlikely, but without a proper investigation none of these possibilities can be excluded.”

It’s worth noting that the article did not get many views on the GroundUp site and as far as we can tell did not get many views on the sites of republishers. The article did not “go viral” and on Twitter the predominant response was a lack of sympathy for a prisoner who died. This may have been the end of GroundUp’s coverage of Thabo Bester. But the article did result in us receiving a few tip-offs, some anonymous. The editor was sceptical of the claims being made in some of these tip-offs.

19 January 2023: Damons sent questions to SAPS Free State spokesperson Brigadier Makhele asking whether the DNA analysis was completed, if the corpse had been positively identified and asked about the status of the murder investigation. We received no response.

Damons sent nearly identical questions to DCS spokesperson Nxumalo and received no response. She also asked if DCS kept DNA records of prisoners.

Damons sent similar questions to G4S and received a response stating that they could not comment.

20 January: We published our second story: [Murder at Mangaung Prison: Leaked report shows ‘Facebook rapist’ was dead before a fire broke out in his cell](#)

We received further tip-offs after this. At this point the story appeared to be much bigger than we initially anticipated. A second reporter, Daniel Steyn, was assigned to assist Damons on the story, and our senior reporter James Stent also began assisting. We were still unsure whether Bester escaped, and the editor leaned towards thinking not. At minimum though, even if the body was Bester’s, G4S personnel appeared to have failed to prevent his murder and then to prevent his body from being burnt, DCS and SAPS had dragged their feet in the subsequent investigation, and there had been a lack of honesty with the public about what happened.

26 January: Damons followed up by email with DCS spokesperson Nxumalo and received no response.

Over the next month the reporters spoke to many sources and tried to get hold of various documents, in between working on other stories.

8 March: Damons sent questions to SAPS Free State (Brigadier Makhele) asking the status of the investigation, to comment on the DNA results which showed a mismatch between the corpse and the woman claiming to be Bester's mother, the whereabouts of the corpse, whether Magudamana had been interviewed, and whether SAPS was investigating the possibility that Bester ran a business from inside prison. We received no response.

Steyn sent questions by email to DCS spokesperson Nxumalo, almost identical to above. We received no response.

Steyn sent questions by email to G4S, almost identical to above. We were told that G4S was cooperating with the authorities.

9 March: Damons sent questions by email to JICS, almost identical to above. Spokesperson Cupido responded and this was incorporated into our next article.

15 March: We published [Did the Facebook rapist die in his cell? Or did he escape from prison?](#)

This story opened the floodgates, and made use of court documents, the autopsy and interviews with a number of people with knowledge of Bester, especially the woman claiming to be Bester's biological mother. But even at this point, despite us now all leaning towards the view that Bester had escaped, we decided to err on the side of caution. For this story we had to send a freelance reporter, Chris Gilili, to the high court to obtain documents (and even this proved to be a mission). For subsequent stories freelance reporters Kimberly Mutandiro and Masego Mafata also assisted.

Now we began receiving several reports of Bester being sighted after 3 May 2022.

16 March: Steyn sent Brigadier Makhele photos of Thabo Bester shopping with Nandipha Magudumana in June 2022. We asked whether SAPS had seen this evidence before and whether this confirmed that Bester had escaped. We gave a three hour deadline. We received no response.

Steyn sent similar questions to DCS spokesperson Nxumalo and received no response.

Damons sent similar questions to JICS. Spokesperson Cupido responded and her response was incorporated in the article.

We published [Man resembling Thabo Bester spotted in Sandton, nearly two months after his supposed death in prison fire](#)

17 March: We sent questions to Brigadier Makhele as well as the spokespeople for Minister Bheki Cele. We referred them to our most recent reports and asked them what they were doing to recapture Bester, whether there will be an inquiry into how he escaped, to comment on the status of the SAPS investigation and whether the body had been positively identified as Bester. We received no response from the Minister's office but Makhele said the investigation was at a critical stage and that he could not comment further.

Steyn sent questions to Minister Ronald Lamola, with similar questions to above with a three hour deadline. His spokesperson Chrispin Phiri responded that he did not see the urgency. GroundUp Editor Geffen then responded to Phiri explaining why the matter was urgent. Phiri then responded that the final investigative report was not yet complete and he could therefore not comment authoritatively on our questions.

We published [More evidence links Thabo Bester and Dr Nandipha Magudumana](#)

18 March: DCS spokesperson Nxumalo gave an interview on ENCA in which he stated that the autopsy report had not yet been tabled with DCS.

We published [Thabo Bester saga: Prison department denies it has autopsy report. Here it is!](#)

20 March: Steyn emailed Brigadier Makhele to respond to evidence that Bester was running a business from inside prison. We attached two photos showing Bester video-conferencing to an event in Sandton while in prison. We received an almost identical response to previously.

Steyn sent similar questions to DCS spokesperson Nxumalo who responded that an investigation on Thabo Bester is ongoing. He asked that DCS be allowed to complete its investigation and provide a conclusive report.

Also this week, freelance reporter Oliver Meth contacted us with additional information about a warder who had sent emails to the Deputy Minister alerting him to Bester's escape.

22 March: We published Meth's story: [Facebook rapist: Deputy Minister was informed by warder that Thabo Bester escaped](#)

Steyn and Damons then began publishing a series of shocking stories which pointed to gross incompetence or corruption by either G4S, the state or both. We continued to receive tip-offs from members of the public regarding Bester and Magudumana, and steadily worked through these, verifying as best we could, with our limited resources.

Steyn emailed Brigadier Makhele asking if there was a police official to whom we could refer sources about Bester's current whereabouts. The response was that Crime Stop could be contacted or it could be reported using the MySAPS app. The reaction to this in the

GroundUp office was incredulous and indicated to us that the police were not taking the investigation seriously.

23 March: Steyn sent a message via WhatsApp to the national SAPS spokesperson asking them to respond to an audio recording of a phone call between Bester and a client of Arum Holdings that had taken place on 16 March 2023. (Steyn sent the recording too.) They referred us to the Gauteng spokesperson who referred us to the Hawks and Free State SAPS (Brigadier Makhele). We cannot determine if Makhele responded because he has put disappearing messages on his WhatsApp.

We published [Thabo Bester saga: Nandipha Magudumana abandons her rented mansion](#)

It had been four months since our first story in November. Moreover it was more than a week since our story exposed the probable escape. Why had Magudumana not been questioned and arrested at that time? We wrote in this article: “We have been sharing all the evidence we uncover with the police.”

Steyn also sent questions to G4S asking how it was possible for Bester to run a business from prison. G4S said it could not comment.

24 March: Steyn phoned Brigadier Makhele to ask if the police were actively looking for Bester and Magudumana, Makhele said he could not respond beyond his previous emails to us.

Steyn spoke on the phone to Stephen Page and Gert Byleveldt, G4S managers at the prison. Both declined to respond to our questions.

We published perhaps our most extraordinary story on the saga thus far [Thabo Bester ran a glamorous media company from prison](#).

25 March: Steyn emailed and sent a WhatsApp to Brigadier Makhele after DCS admitted Bester had escaped, asking for confirmation from SAPS that Bester had escaped, whether Bester and Magudumana were being actively searched for, and whether an Interpol Red Notice had been issued. Makhele responded that a Red Notice is part of standard protocol but he could not confirm whether it had been issued yet. Steyn sent questions to Interpol asking if Interpol had received a request to issue a Red Notice by the SAPS, and received no response.

We published [Government admits Thabo Bester has escaped](#)

27 March: Steyn sent questions to G4S’s international head office asking for comment on Bester’s escape and what action would be taken. G4S sent a perfunctory and vague response the following day.

29 March: Steyn sent WhatsApp messages to Brigadier Makhele asking him to comment on an ID used by Bester while running a business after escaping from prison. He referred us to national SAPS. Steyn sent a WhatsApp message to Brigadier Athlenda Mathe who did not respond.

We published [Thabo Bester and Dr Nandipha made millions from construction company](#) which tells how Bester and Magudumana scammed members of Johannesburg high society after Bester had escaped and how Bester brazenly appeared in public.

30 March: We published [G4S booted from control of Mangaung prison after Thabo Bester escape](#)

31 March: Steyn sent a WhatsApp to Brigadier Mathe from national SAPS offering to send further unverified information we had received from a source about Bester's current whereabouts. Mathe accepted the information with gratitude.