

Alleged Parliament arsonist referred for mental observation

The man accused of starting the fire which gutted Parliament buildings, including the National Assembly last week, has been referred for mental observation following his court appearance.



Zandile Christmas Mafe, a suspect accused of breaking into Parliament when the fire started, appears in the Cape Town Magistrate Court, in Cape Town, South Africa, 4 January 2022. Reuters/Sumaya Hisham

Zandile Mafe, 49, appeared in the Cape Town Magistrate's Court, where he is facing two counts of arson, possession of an explosive device and housebreaking.

During Mafe's appearance, a charge of destruction of essential infrastructure was withdrawn and replaced with a charge of the Contravention of the Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist and Related Activities.

NPA Western Cape regional spokesperson, Eric Ntabazalila, said the State argued to have Mafe referred for observation after he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia by the district surgeon.

“The referral comes despite protestations by the defence team, who argued that their client told them that there is nothing wrong with him. The State further argued that Mafe has threatened to go on a hunger strike if his bail application did not start [on Tuesday],” he said.

Ntabazalila said the State also argued that the administration of justice “cannot be held to ransom” by the threat of a hunger strike.

“In response, Senior State Advocate, Helene Booysen, dismissed the argument, stating that... the court must refer Mafe for [mental observation], as the State cannot be blackmailed or held to ransom by the accused.

“[Booyesen argued that] if there is a bail application and he doesn’t get released, does that mean that he will go on hunger strike until he dies?”



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Magistrate Zamekile Mbalo granted the application and Mafe will now be under observation at Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital for the next 30 days.

The case has been postponed to 11 February.

Meanwhile, Parliament has announced that the work of the National Assembly will be held in an unaffected part of the Parliamentary precinct until further notice.

Parliament spokesperson, Moloto Mothapo, said the decision was taken following a meeting between Parliament Presiding Officers and political party chief whips.

"After considering various alternative venues, the meeting took a decision that beyond Sona [State of the Nation Address], the sittings of the National Assembly - including the Budget Speech scheduled for February, must be retained... in the Good Hope Chamber.

"Good Hope Chamber, historically utilised for the sittings of the Cape Legislative Assembly between 1854 and 1885, is one of the oldest meeting rooms of Parliament, has essential technical capabilities and meets basic requirements for sittings of the House.

"It is one of the buildings of Parliament that has not been affected by the fire and has previously been used for National Assembly mini-plenaries. It has a seating capacity of 170 persons and permits 70 persons under Covid-19 social distancing arrangements," Mothapo said.

As announced last week, President Cyril Ramaphosa is expected to deliver the State of the Nation Address at Cape Town City Hall.