

## **MPs go back into battle on arms deal**

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Battle lines will be redrawn on the country's controversial multi-billion rand arms deal in Parliament today during a three-hour debate that will once again pit the African National Congress against opposition party MPs.

The ANC is expected to bring out its big guns for the debate, including cabinet ministers, but attempts to find out who the government speakers would be proved unsuccessful as the party chose to keep its strategy under wraps.

IFP MP and former standing committee on public accounts (Scopa) chairperson Dr Gavin Woods, the DA's Raenette Taljaard and the PAC's Patricia de Lille are among the opposition MPs who will have their say.

The National Assembly will consider seven committee reports, completed late last year, on the investigation's findings.

The cost of the deal — to buy fighter and trainer aircraft, submarines, corvettes and helicopters — and the value of industrial participation offsets are again expected to come under scrutiny.

The deal was originally valued at just under R30-billion but this has since increased to R53-billion. Unofficial estimates put the figure much higher.

The government is expecting about R140-billion in offset agreements from the deal, although this figure too has been questioned.

Opposition parties are expected to accuse the executive of riding roughshod over Parliament and undermining the work of Scopa, the once powerful watchdog committee.

The ANC, on the other hand, will want to put the matter to rest once and for all.

The arms deal was mired in allegations of irregularities and kick-backs, but the multi-agency probe found no evidence of "improper or unlawful conduct" by the government and no grounds to suggest its contracting position was flawed.

The probe split Scopa — which originally called for the investigation in November 2000 — along party lines and led to the resignation of Woods in March this year. He was replaced by the NNP's Francois Beukman as chair.

Woods was a vocal critic of the work done by the Auditor-General, the Public Protector and the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions.

The animosity within the committee also led to the resignation from Parliament of the ANC's former public accounts spokesman Andrew Feinstein in August last year, citing disappointment over his party's handling of the deal.

Another victim of the investigation, although for different reasons, was former ANC Chief Whip Tony Yengeni.

Yengeni, who is also a former chairman of Parliament's joint standing committee on defence, is standing trial for fraud and perjury relating to a discount received on a new Mercedes 4x4 from a company involved in the deal.

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