

Former president Nelson Mandela's house was allegedly bugged during the dirty war ahead of the ANC's 2007 national conference.



Former South African president Nelson Mandela has his head caressed by his wife Graca Machel

Photograph by: Daniel Berehulak

Credit: AP

This was revealed by Cosatu secretary-general Zwelinzima Vavi this week.

Vavi said a listening device was discovered in Madiba's Houghton, Johannesburg, house during a sweeping exercise by the police's VIP protection unit, responsible for the former president's security. "A bug was found at Mandela's home. I had discussions with Mandela and he told me about the bug himself," he said. Police spokesman Colonel Lindela Mashigo said he could neither confirm nor deny the incident. Vavi first made the revelation in a speech at a National Union of Metal Workers of SA political school on Monday. He told the audience that an atmosphere of fear had gripped the ruling alliance in the run-up to the conference, and that leaders who visited Mandela's home would insist on talking to the former president outside the house "under a tree" for fear that the house was bugged.

Vavi believed the device was installed as part of the battle that was going on in the ruling party. However, he could not say whether an investigation into the matter ever revealed who planted the bug. At the time, the ANC was split between those who backed then president Thabo Mbeki and supporters of his challenger, Jacob Zuma. Mbeki wanted to serve a third term as ANC president but was defeated by Zuma. Zuma was facing corruption charges, which were later dropped, and his supporters believed Mbeki was behind attempts to have him prosecuted. Several leaders who were fearful of the damage such a power struggle would do to both the party and the government lobbied for Mandela's intervention. However, the Nelson Mandela Foundation wanted to keep the former president out of politics, arguing that he had retired. But some ANC leaders remained close to him and visited him at home. Tokyo Sexwale, then ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe and his then deputy, Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele, and former ANC Youth League president Fikile Mbalula were among those who visited Mandela. Mbeki's spokesman, Mukoni Ratshitanga, said he did not know if such a matter was ever brought before the former president.

Vavi said the atmosphere of "fear" that prevailed ahead of the 2007 conference had not completely abated. He said there were worrying signs that some in the alliance wanted a return to that era.