Hijack drama

Gunman forces pilot to fly to Jan Smuts

JOHANNESBURG. — A lone gunman wielding an AK-47 rifle hijacked a Royal Swazi Air aircraft on a flight from Maputo in Mozambique last night, diverting the plane to Jan Smuts Airport.

The hijacker forced the pilot to fly the plane, which was bound for Manzini's Matsapa airport in Swaziland, to Maseru in Lesotho, but the aircraft was apparently unable to land because landing lights were out of order.

It is believed the pilot then asked permission to land at Jan Smuts.

Police ended the three-hour hijacking drama when they stormed the Royal Swazi Airline plane at the Johannesburg airport.

It was not immediately clear whether the unidentified gunman, allegedly armed with an AK-47 assault rifle, surrendered or was overpowered by police. Police at the airport said the hijacking was over, but did not immediately release any details.

At least three people — one believed to be the hijacker — were taken to a hospital.

A doctor, who declined to identify himself, said at least one of the patients had gunshot wounds.

"All of them are alive. The patients are fine — they are stable," he said.

The hijacked Fokker 28 landed at Jan Smuts shortly before 8pm, Manzini Airport manager Mr B D Hlatswayo confirmed.

He said authorities at Jan Smuts Airport were negotiating with the hijacker or hijackers.

Swaziland's Director of Civil Aviation, Mr D Litchfield, said last night the hijacker had demanded to be flown to Australia.

He said he had no further details and was trying to remain in telephonic contact with Jan Smuts Airport.

The SA Minister of Transport, Dr Piet Welgemoed, was also at the airport.

A SA Police spokeswoman said a man wielding an AK-47 assault rifle had hijacked the plane. She said the hijacker had been drinking.

Members of the Internal Stability Unit and police psychologists were sent to Jan Smuts airport.

Mr Hlatswayo said the aircraft, which was on a scheduled passenger flight from Maputo to Manzini was the same plane involved in the Seychelles hijacking of 1981.

Mercenary Colonel "Mad" Mike Hoare led a group of 44 men in a coup attempt on the island in that year when they flew into the country on a scheduled Swazi Air flight.

The coup attempt was uncovered when an alert customs official searched the baggage of one of the group.

In a subsequent shootout at the airport Col Hoare and his band hijacked an Air India jet to get out of the Seychelles.

They flew to Louis Botha airport in Durban, where they were arrested.

● A D F Malan aviation control worker said two Johannesburg-bound flights — South African Airways' SA336 and Flitestar's GM110 — were briefly delayed in taking off last night, but both were given the all-clear by 8.30 and "everything was back to normal". — Sapa, Staff Reporters