

# AFRICA

MOZAMBIQUE

## Frelimo and the pilots: a battle of wits

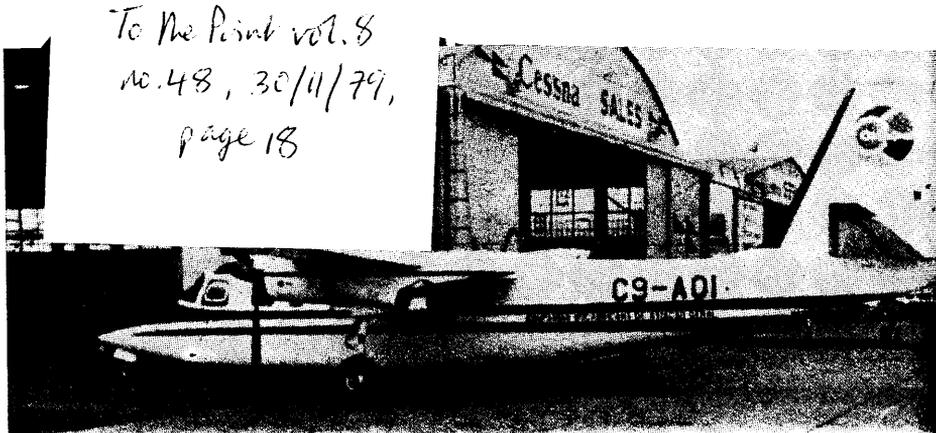


Released on bail pending his trial in Pretoria for the alleged theft of Frelimo planes Portuguese national Rolando Mendes thought it safer to put as much distance as possible between him and his accusers. He quietly

made his way to Jan Smuts airport and hopped on the first available flight to Lisbon.

So ended two weeks of drama which had started when reports sent back to Maputo by Frelimo informers in South Africa that two "stolen" planes had been traced to Pretoria brought a full team of Mozambique secret police (SNASP) top officials scurrying to the capital.

Actually three aircraft had been missing for about two months. Frelimo's own radio station Radio Mozambique reported last week that one of them, Aero-Commander C9-A01, was somewhere in England under the colours of its



*Machel's personal aircraft: 'diverted' to England*

new owner. The other two are still in Pretoria undergoing extensive repairs for which Frelimo will eventually receive a bill for some R20000.

What could have been a delicate court case for the judges of Pretoria's Supreme Court came to a swift end when the company that had bought the planes from Mendes, Alpen Flugzeughandel, withdrew its claim. The aircraft were then ceded to Mozambique by court order.

Mendes was arrested for the theft of the planes and released on R300 bail. But he was nowhere to be found when summons to appear in court was issued.

At the last count the Mozambique Marxist regime was losing 27 to 2 in the battle of wits with the former owners of the aircraft nationalised by the Frelimo government shortly after independence. Only the two planes found in Pretoria have been recovered.

One by one, in flights of two to seven, resourceful pilots have managed to fly the planes out of Mozambique despite the tight surveil-

lance of the many branches of Frelimo's police and a full army of Vigilantes.

Mendes, who before independence owned and operated one of the largest and most efficient charter services in Mozambique, had become a trusted Frelimo official after his fleet of modern aircraft had been taken over by the regime. When he and his pilots fled taking with them three planes, he was managing director of the state-owned Companhia, Moçambicana de Aviação Geral (COMAG).

It is a well known story in Mozambique that at the time of independence Mendes, who was based in the northern city of Nampula, made a big show of tearing up his Portuguese passport proclaiming in public his everlasting devotion to the Marxist regime. His defection led to an incongruous situation. One of the most hated men in Mozambique, ex-reporter Castro Lopes, who now heads the sinister secret police SNASP, turned up in Pretoria to plead the case for the Marxist regime.