

MiG pilot defects

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A YOUNG Mozambican pilot defected to South Africa yesterday, flying his Russian-built Mig-17 fighter across the border at treetop level to escape his country's radar.

Supersonic Mirage F1 fighter planes from SAAF's No 1 Squadron intercepted the ageing fighter shortly after it crossed into South Africa about 55km north of Komatipoort, just after 10am.

They forced it to land at the top-secret Hoedspruit Air Force Base at 10.29am.

Lieutenant Adriano Francisco Bomba, 23, said as he climbed from the cockpit: "I want political asylum."

Diplomatic initiatives were already underway last night to have the jet fighter of the 1950s returned to Mozambique.

And South African military intelligence officers had begun to interrogate the young black pilot, who has indicated he wants to live in South Africa.

The SADF flew local and foreign journalists to Hoedspruit yesterday afternoon to meet South Africa's first defector from socialist Mozambique.

The handsome young pilot, his camouflage uniform immaculate, appeared apprehensive as he faced the array of Press and television cameramen at a Press conference last night.

He spoke good English with a slight American accent.

"I came to South Africa because I don't agree to Frelimo's policy," he said.

"In Mozambique, after six years' independence, I can't see progress.

"The way of life in Mozambique is getting worse and worse and I am tired of this, and so I made up my mind and decided to

come to South Africa to ask for political asylum.

"When I arrived here in South Africa I was very well received and I am happy with that."

He excused himself, saying he was tired and "nervous".

He did not disclose where he lived in Mozambique, nor whether he had left any family behind.

He took off from Maputo airport at about 9am on a navigational flight which took him north-east, flying at about 1 500ft (about 500m).

On reaching Manica, the first leg of his triangular training flight, he swung 90 degrees to the west and overflew Zinavane, diving to tree-top level when he reached the Massintonto River.

Keeping low, he followed the course of the river until he crossed the South African border.

After overflying Mala Mala, he put his aircraft into a steep climb "to show up on South African Defence Force radar screens", levelling off at 22 000 ft (about 7 000m).

Within minutes of crossing the border, he was intercepted by two SAAF Mirage F1 interceptors, piloted by Captain Hennie Louw and Major Frans Pretorius, of the crack No 1 Squadron.

The pilots were returning to base from an exercise when they got the call to lock on to the intruder.

"We were in a position to shoot him down and had decided to do so when we realised that the pilot had no aggressive intentions," Maj Pretorius said last night.

"I could not believe my eyes when I first saw the MiG, painted sky-blue and bearing the Mozambican military symbol on its tail. It's not every day that you find one flying over your own country."

Unable to make radio contact with the MiG, the two South African pilots carried out a regulation international procedure for indicating to the pilot that he was to follow them.

The MiG pilot waggled his wings to show he understood the command.

"Capt Louw positioned his plane on the starboard (right) side of the MiG and I stayed behind to keep the Russian plane in my gunsights — just in case," Maj Pretorius said.

"We approached the Hoedspruit airbase and Capt Louw had to break from the formation to land, because his fuel reserves had run dangerously low. We did one more circuit and Lieut Bomba then put his MiG down. I followed him in."

The fact that the MiG, flying at about 900km/h, was only about 40km over the border when the interceptors caught up shows the SADF must have been monitoring its flight path while it was still over Mozambican territory. But the SADF was not giving any details last night.