

Top-level move to decide jet's fate

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High-level negotiations have been set in motion between South Africa and Mozambique to decide what should happen to the Mozambique Air Force MIG 17 fighter-bomber which was forced to land at the Hoedspruit Air Force base in the Eastern Transvaal yesterday.

The pilot, Lieutenant Adriano Francisco Bomba (23), will be "looked after" by SAAF personnel until political and diplomatic arrangements are finalised on his future.

Lieutenant Bomba, who made a daring low-level exit from Mozambique in his Russian-built plane, was about 90 km inside South African air space when two SAAF Mirage F1 supersonic fighters from No 1 Squadron intercepted

him while he flew at about 900 km/h.

They forced him to land at Hoedspruit base at 10.29 am.

Once on the ground he told authorities: "I want political asylum."

"We are not at war with Mozambique, although it is a warplane with which he transgressed our border.

We will look after him until higher authority decides what to do with him," said Brigadier A J S "Dries" van der Lith, chief of staff intelligence.

Authorities would not allow questions to be put to Lieutenant Bomba.

They said he would face a debriefing.

Major Frans Pretorius, one of the pilots who forced down the MIG 17, said at first it appeared the Russian-made aircraft could have had aggressive intentions.

"We broke in behind him and Captain Hen-

rie Louw, who saw him first, flew to his right and waggled his wings signalling that he should obey instructions to land.

"The Mozambican pilot, in turn, waggled his wings, acknowledging the landing instruction.

"How do you feel? Well, you don't see a Russian aircraft in South Africa air space every day," said Major Pretorius.

The MIG was armed with a 37 mm cannon and two 23 mm cannons.

The 37 mm cannon was inoperative but the fighter carried ammunition for all the weapons.

Brigadier van der Lith said the two pilots had had to decide "fairly quickly" whether to shoot down or force down the jet.

Because Lieutenant Bomba had maintained his course and obeyed instructions they de-

ecided he had no aggressive intentions.

"We gather he took off with the idea to defect in that the first words he said on the ground were that he wanted political asylum.

"He had apparently tried to make radio contact in the air but failed to do," said Brigadier van der Lith.

Although the MIG at first appeared to be in fairly good condition, closer inspection revealed this was not so.

The tyres were worn and regarded by SAAF pilots as "dangerous."

"We can't do anything with the aircraft because it is old, — unless we put it in a museum.

"Higher authority will probably decide on how it should be returned because we are not interested in keeping it," added Brigadier van der Lith.