

SAMORA MACHEL: THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY

by Antonio Makwala

"Samora lives in each one of us", proclaimed the banner hung across the facade of the Maputo city hall. Beneath the banner, on the night of 19 October, massed choirs sang in homage to Mozambique's fallen leader, concluding a day of ceremonies marking the first anniversary of the death of President Samora Machel.

As the band played the haunting melody composed for Samora's funeral last year, Sergio Vieira one of Mozambique's best-known poets, as well as a former security minister, read out the names of the 35 people who had died in the tragic plane crash at Mbuzini exactly a year previously. Slides of each of the victims flashed onto a large screen. To each name, the choirs called out "present", as if answering a roll-call.

As the screen showed pictures of the desolate hillside at Mbuzini, with the wreckage of the presidential aircraft, and with Samora Machel's coffin in the foreground, Sergio Vieira cried "At your orders, commander-in-chief !" The choirs responded with one voice "At your orders !".

Taking up the idea that "Samora lives in each one of us", a child cried "I am Samora !" into a microphone. And the cry was taken up and amplified by the huge choir.

Near the end of this gala, film of Mozambique's proclamation of independence was flashed onto the screen. Once again the unforgettable voice of Samora Machel boomed across Maputo's Independence Square. Once again the crowd could hear Samora leading the chanting of the two slogans forever associated with his name: "A Luta Continua !" (The Struggle Continues), and "Independencia ou Morte - Venceremos !" (Independence or death - we shall win).

The militant spirit of the ceremony was appropriate. For President Samora died as he had lived, fighting against apartheid, fighting to bring peace to the southern African region. On 19 October 1986, he had attended a summit meeting in Zambia together with host president Kenneth Kaunda, President Jose Eduardo dos Santos of Angola and President Mobutu of Zaire. They were discussing how to

lessen the dependence of the region on transport routes through South Africa.

On the journey home, the presidential aircraft, a Soviet built Tupolev 134, made a fatal turn to the right away from its correct flight path. The evidence of the cockpit voice recorder recovered from the wreckage shows that the crew made that turn because they were following a radio beacon (a VOR - Very High Frequency Omnidirectional Range).

They believed it to be the Maputo airport beacon, and the instrument panel of the plane showed that at least one of the navigational dials was set for the correct Maputo frequency. The only theory that fits all the known facts is that President Samora's plane was lured to its destruction by a decoy beacon transmitting a powerful signal on the same frequency as the Maputo beacon. That beacon drew the plane to the southwest until it ploughed into a hillside at Mbuzini just inside South African territory.

In short, President Samora's death was no accident. As his successor Joaquim Chissano said in June of this year: "Our enemy, which is racism, still racism, decided to resort once again to violence, and murdered our President". President Samora "was becoming a dangerous man for the enemy", continued Mr Chissano, "because he was acting as one of the principal mobilisers of forces throughout the world against colonialism and against racism. Because of this they decided to murder him".

Mozambique has not formally accused South Africa of the murder, but it has rejected the conclusions of a South African board of inquiry under Judge Cecil Margo, which proclaimed the crash an accident, and blamed the Soviet crew.

There remain many unanswered questions about South African behaviour on the night of the crash and immediately afterwards. Why did the South Africans, who admit that their radar (easily the most sophisticated in sub-Saharan Africa) was following the plane from the time when it was overflying Zimbabwe, take no measures to warn the pilot that he was off course and in mortal danger? Why did they not even inform Maputo of the crash until almost ten hours after it had happened? Why, when the police arrived at the scene, did they busy themselves with the documents scattered among the wreckage rather

than with helping the wounded ?

South African foreign minister Roelof Botha insinuated that the Soviet crew had been drinking on duty. The inquests disproved this, but during the Margo inquiry Botha defended his behaviour, claiming that he had spread disinformation in order to defend South Africa.

Preceding President Samora's death were threats made against his person by the South African Defence Minister General Magnus Malan. Blaming Mozambique, without a shred of evidence, for a mine blast inside South Africa, Malan said: "If President Machel chooses land mines, South Africa will react accordingly". If President Samora "chooses terrorism and revolution, he will clash head on with South Africa", continued Malan. That was on 7 October 1986.

A year later we find General Malan making very similar threats against President Chissano. The same baseless allegations that Mozambique is "exporting violence to South Africa" are made, and Malan quite explicitly warned that "if President Chissano does not pull his weight in this regard, then South Africa will have to take measures to neutralise terrorists in his country".

Mozambicans are inclined to take General Malan's threats very seriously. No-one will forget that less than two weeks after being threatened by Malan, Samora Machel was dead.

But the trauma of President Samora's death also had a positive side: it proved that the Mozambican nation could outlive its founder. The South African media gleefully predicted a struggle for power in which the country would fall to pieces.

Instead, the Frelimo Central Committee met, in accordance with constitutional norms, and elected Joaquim Chissano president unanimously and by acclamation. The deep sense of loss arising from Samora Machel's death has not caused Mozambique to lose its sense of direction, and, although his style of leadership may be different, Joaquim Chissano has pursued the policy lines laid down by his predecessor.

The tragedy of Mbuzini proved once more that, in the final analysis, it is not the hand of the assassin that makes history.

The name of Samora Machel will be remembered and honoured long after that of General Magnus Malan is just an obscure historical footnote.