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THE TRUTH ABOUT MBUZINI: WHO KNOWS AND WHO WILL TELL?

by Phyllis Johnson

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins to unravel the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa, it moves closer and closer to the critical questions of who knew and who gave the orders.

And as the muddy waters begin to clear, the net is tightening around the "Old Crocodile", P.W. Botha, President during the 1980s, the years of South Africa's total response to the "total onslaught".

In those years, the National Party and the Afrikaner *Broederbond* (brotherhood) devised means of responding to what they claimed was a fight against the onslaught of communism. The State Security Council, chaired by Botha, was the coordinating body for these responses.

Following the negotiations of the early 1980s that led to partial though unfulfilled agreements for Angola and Namibia, and the Nkomati Accord for Mozambique, infiltration of cadres by the African National Congress (ANC) continued and escalated.

The situation on the ground deteriorated, and the State Security Council began to initiate responses that were ever more drastic.

As 1985 grew into 1986, the responses became more desperate. There was Operation Marion to contain unrest in the Eastern Cape, the public deployment of Angolan exiles in urban townships, and the training of Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) cadres in Caprivi to operate as a "third force".

The United States administration made public its intention to supply covert military assistance to Jonas Savimbi in Angola, bypassing congress, and including surface-to-air Stinger missiles.

The Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo), with South African backing, unleashed a major offensive in the centre of Mozambique aimed at dividing the country and making it ungovernable.

In February and October of 1986, two international statesmen were assassinated -- one on a snowy street in Stockholm and the other on a grassy hillside in the South African "homeland" of Kangwane, at Mbuzini, just a few metres from the border with Mozambique.

The first one, Prime Minister Olof Palme of Sweden, was shot by an assassin who has never been identified.

The other, President Samora Machel of Mozambique, died when his plane crashed on the way home from a meeting in Zambia with other regional leaders to review the support given by Malawi, Zaire, and South Africa to forces in neighbouring countries intent upon overthrowing their governments.

In both cases, the trail to the truth was muddied with innuendo, half-truths and false stories, some deliberately planted. Visibility was one reason given for the plane crash, on a night of clear skies; another was drunken pilots, which forensic reports proved untrue.

Both men were implacable and outspoken opponents of apartheid, and both dedicated supporters of the ANC. Machel was on the frontline, with training and transit routes, and Palme, political lobbyist and a "funding father", provided a secure base in Europe.

The Swedish government has recently confirmed that it spent at least US\$400 million directly on the struggle against apartheid.

Ten years later, in a prison dock in Johannesburg, a former commander of the Vlakplaas police death squad implicated his former government in the Swedish assassination which he said was carried out by a former Rhodesian soldier, Ant White, with the knowledge of South African superspy, Craig Williamson. Both men have denied this allegation.

Eugene de Kock, known as "Prime Evil" in his Vlakplaas days, was later convicted on 89 counts and sentenced to over 200 years in prison.

The chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, said those who gave de Kock his orders must also be called to account.

"He was part of a whole system and there were those who gave orders," Tutu said. "Those who were ultimately responsible must not be allowed to get away ... The foot soldiers must not be the only ones who get clobbered."

Another former Vlakplaas commander, Brig. Jack Cronje, testified that there was no doubt that Botha knew of a secret unit which targeted anti-apartheid activists in the 1980s.

Cronje said that Botha, as chairman of the State Security Council which included representatives of national intelligence, police and the defence force, would have been kept fully informed of the activities of the unit known by its Afrikaans acronym, Trewits, which was formed in 1985.

Cronje said the elimination of activists was part of a broader plan to keep the National Party in power and to combat communism. "Without the security police," he said, "the National Party would not have stayed in government one week."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is currently studying what action to take if Botha refuses to appear and testify.

Meanwhile, questions about Mbuzini remain to be answered. Why did the plane turn away from its normal path and angle into a hillside? Did the ground-proximity alarm sound or not? And was there a false beacon that lured the plane down?

"Certainty about the precise chain of events which robbed Africa of one of her greatest leaders still eludes us," President Nelson Mandela said at Mbuzini, on the 10th anniversary.

"There are unanswered questions along the journey that led to the loss of more than 30 lives on this hillside" on 19 October 1986, Mandela said. "And we shall leave no stone unturned to ensure that, in the fullness of time, nothing but the whole truth is known about these events."(SARDC)