

Did Frelimo generals betray Machel?

The D'Oliveira probe into the plane crash that killed former Mozambique president Samora Machel, is investigating a possible betrayal by Frelimo generals, and an on-board explosion before the plane hit the ground. **MZILIKAZI WA AFRIKA** reports

A group of disgruntled Frelimo generals may have sold out their former president, Samora Machel, to the apartheid government in 1986 after they learnt that he was on the verge of firing them.

The generals allegedly conspired with their South African counterparts to ensure that Machel's plane crashed into a remote hillside on the border between South Africa and Mozambique near Komatipoort.

D'Oliveira Special Investigation Team spokesman, Dr. Torie Pretorius, confirmed on Friday that investigators are probing the alleged conspiracy by Frelimo generals.

He declined, however, to provide either the names of those being investigated or the exact nature of the information supplied to South African military intelligence (MI) operatives by the disenchanted generals.

Pretorius also indicated that his team is investigating separate evidence that a powerful explosion ripped through Machel's plane seconds before it tore into the deserted hillside outside Mbuzini village on October 19, 1986.

Machel and 34 other senior Mozambican officials, who had accompanied him on an official visit to the late Zairean president, Mobutu sese Seko, were killed when the Tupolev 134A-3 hit ground.

"Our investigating team has received some pretty detailed information that a powerful explosion occurred just before the plane hit the hill, but I can't say anymore at the present moment," said Dr. Pretorius.

Pretorius did, however, say that a team was currently trying to trace a number of South African soldiers who were seen "doing something" on the accident scene a couple of days before Machel died.

"We've already interviewed several of the soldiers about this but haven't got any closer to finding out what they were up to. It seems that the team will have to interview many more

before we're able to either confirm our suspicions or dismiss allegations," said Dr. Pretorius.

But Pretorius refused to be drawn on reports in the Sunday Times that Machel was about to launch a anti-corruption programme within the upper echelons of his administration and that he had already drawn up a list of senior generals and other officials who were to be sacked.

The generals allegedly knew of their imminent dismissal and began leaking sensitive information about Machel's movements and other plans to South African agents.

The South African government, in the form of then minister of defense, Magnus Malan, escalated its verbal war with Machel in the weeks leading up to his death by accusing him of violating the 1984 Nkomati peace accord and harbouring terrorists in areas adjacent to South Africa's borders.

Although Malan has not been personally linked to the alleged conspiracy, the military is accused of deploying a mobile navigational beacon to misdirect Machel's flight.

Pretorius would only confirm that the investigating team is reviewing an alleged order by a senior South African officer to deploy a beacon in the area.

He added that the team is also probing how former South African foreign affairs minister, Pik Botha, had managed to get to the remote accident site within 30 minutes of the plane hitting the ground.

"The only other significant thing that we're currently investigating are the persistent reports that large numbers of soldiers speaking an unfamiliar language also arrived on the scene shortly after the accident," said Pretorius.

"Nothing is very clear at the moment and so it's far too early to try and interpret some of the evidence." The investigation into Machel's death was officially reopened in June 1997 after a secret meeting between safety and security minister, Sydney Mufamadi and Mozambican minister of the interior, Almeirono Manhanje. - African Eye News Service, February 2, 1998.