

How Samora Machel signed

There was motive for the then South African government to kill Mozambique's Samora Machel, and there is plenty of evidence to back up these claims, writes
Debora Patta

Robert Kirby's article on the Samora Machel crash (June 19 to 25) is devoid of any context. He writes as if South Africa in 1986 was a perfectly normal society, with a judicial system above reproach and a defence force that would never stoop to dirty tricks. Those at the receiving end of apartheid's evil deeds need no convincing as to what this country's former rulers were capable of.

South Africa was perfectly capable of killing Mozambican president Samora Machel, and in fact had tried on several occasions to assassinate him. Furthermore, the South African Defence Force (SADF) was equipped with sophisticated beacon equipment that was part of its covert operations used during the Angolan war.

One has to ask why South Africa always hauled out Judge Cecil Margo whenever it needed to conduct a sensitive aviation inquiry. At the time of the crash, the SADF was under suspicion. The mere fact that Judge Margo was an honorary colonel with ties to the old South African Air Force was reason enough for him to excuse himself from the inquiry into the Machel crash. But during the apartheid days it was customary for the accused to investigate themselves.

Kirby dazzles and bamboozles readers with complicated, technical jargon. But he has only regurgitated the findings of a 12-year-old commission of inquiry that -- at best -- chose to ignore critical evidence.

What did the South Africans have to gain by killing Machel? Kirby argues that "with Samora Machel's death South Africa was much diminished. We lost a neighbour of imagination, purpose and optimism. With the Nkomati Accord signed, a new chapter of co-operation had been opened. There was nothing to gain, even for the apartheid regime."

In terms of the Nkomati Accord, the African National Congress was

unceremoniously booted out of Mozambique and South Africa agreed to stop all military and logistical support for the rebel Mozambican group Renamo.

But history tells a different story. Machel had entered into a pact with the devil and signed what many would argue was his own death warrant.

The accord was a charade. South Africa had no intention of living up to it. Even as leaders of the two countries were shaking hands, supplies were being flown to Renamo. Pretoria was beefing up its Casa Banana base in Gorongosa. And when Casa Banana was captured by Frelimo a year after the accord, documents left behind showed that Machel had been cheated.

Supplies continued to be flown into the base, an airstrip had been built there and one of its most frequent visitors was South Africa's deputy foreign minister Louis Nel.

South Africa also initiated Renamo operations out of bases in Malawi, which had become a focal point for destabilisation. Mozambican protests to Malawi culminated in a visit to Blantyre on September 11 1986 by Machel, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe.

In his book *Machel of Mozambique* Ian Christie writes: "When Machel set out on that trip he was angry. He detested [Malawi president Hastings] Banda and had on several occasions described him in my presence as a fascist."

During a two-hour meeting, a furious Machel presented Banda with a dossier containing evidence of active support for Renamo by Malawi and South Africa. The documentation included a photocopy of a Malawian passport issued to Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama.

On his return to Maputo, Machel let off steam at a media conference where he told journalists: "We will

place missiles along the border with Malawi if support to the bandits is not ended. And we will close the border to traffic between Malawi and South Africa going through Mozambique." That was a serious threat: an average of 70 trucks a day were passing through Mozambique's Tete province on the international route to the ports of South Africa.

Shortly after the meeting, Renamo launched a three-pronged conventional military invasion of Mozambique from Malawi. The invading military columns were led by white soldiers believed to be members of the South African Special Forces (reccies).

And that's when Machel drove another nail into his coffin. During a visit to the province of Tete, which borders Malawi, he said: "The Malawian authorities have made their country a base for mercenaries of various nationalities, but principally South African soldiers. I think president Banda is not responsible. I think ministers, soldiers, members of the police and the Malawian security force have been bought by the South Africans and other countries I don't want to name now, although there is evidence of this."

Machel was planning to fire several of his generals for profiting from the war with Renamo, but never lived to carry this out.

On October 6 1986, General Magnus Malan threatened Machel personally, following an alleged landmine explosion near the area where Machel's plane would crash 13 days later.

"If president Machel chooses landmines, South Africa will react accordingly. If he allows a Moscow-inspired revolutionary war against South Africa, he must also be prepared to take responsibility. If he chooses terrorism and revolution, he will clash head on with South

Africa," warned the general.

The stage had been set for an attempt on Machel's life, but as his widow Graça Machel has said: "We never expected South Africa to attack the presidential plane."

And so it was on October 19, on a dark, still night in Mbuzini, a Tupolev 134 crashed into hilly terrain, killing Machel and 34 others. Only nine people survived the accident.

One of the first people on the scene of the crash site was a local resident who, fearing for his safety, will only give his name as Mike. Because he knew the area well and was able to negotiate the difficult mountainous terrain, he was taken to the scene of the crash by local police.

To his surprise, he found security police already on the scene. "The injured were crying and moaning, the plane wreckage was scattered all over. I was the only one who was a civilian."

Nobody seemed particularly concerned about providing much-needed medical assistance, he says. Instead, police combed through wreckage, demanding that survivors tell them where Samora Machel was. "I don't know what they told them, but they went back to the wreckage and came back with a briefcase and they put it on top of one of the car's boots and started searching it. I knew if they found me I would be in big trouble because what they were doing was unlawful. They were not supposed to search the briefcase."

The next day Mike was forced to go into hiding because SADF soldiers repeatedly visited his home looking for him.

A crash survivor, Machel's chief bodyguard Fernando Manuel João, echoes Mike's words. He had walked a considerable distance in search of help, and at midnight had managed to contact the Komatiport police through the radio of a local religious mission.

When he returned to the crash site, he found that "the South Africans were not at all concerned with the lives of the wounded. They were just messing around with the other things there." João was furious with the South Africans for "refusing to take the wounded to hospital."

The then foreign affairs minister, Pik Botha, later admitted documents had been removed from the wreckage, providing details of a planned Mozambican strike against Malawi. Botha says: "Yes, technically that would have been a violation of diplomatic practice, certainly. But this was done probably to find out what was being discussed, but with respect this has nothing to do with the crash or the causes of the crash."

Colonel Des Lynch was seconded from the South African Air Force to assist with the probe into the crash. For the record, he says he's convinced the crash was caused by pilot error. But he has strong words about the way police and the Department of Foreign Affairs conducted themselves.

"From the first moment that the news was broken by the minister of foreign affairs on the SABC at 7am



Men in black: Then defence minister Manus Malan and then state president PW Botha

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his own death warrant



Very foreign affairs: Pik Botha leaves court after giving evidence to the Machel crash inquiry. PHOTOGRAPH: TREVOR SAMSON

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that led to confusion ... Even the minister ... who called impromptu press conferences, who leaked information to the press, made allegations about drunken behaviour and unserviceable equipment, things he knew very little about, only confused matters.”

To this day there are many people who believe the Russian crew on board the Tupolev 134 were drunk, although there was not a shred of evidence to support this. “Those allegations made an impact ... For a long time (they) contaminated the investigation,” he says.

Another bone of contention was the critical cockpit voice recording, known as the black box. On the day of the crash, civil aviation investigator Piet de Klerk handed the black box over to police for safekeeping. It would be nearly six weeks before he saw that crucial piece of evidence again. The black box was passed on to General Lothar Neethling, who headed the police forensic laboratory — and is shown, in original police footage of the accident, tramping through the wreckage.

In the days and weeks that followed the accident there was much political posturing between South Africa and the Soviet Union, until it was eventually agreed that accident investigators would fly to the Soviet Union to listen to the black box in the presence of their Russian counterparts.

But, says Lynch, literally days before they were due to fly to Moscow, police forensics were still refusing to part with the precious evidence. “We’d now got to the stage where we had to sue the police to give us the boxes back ... Not until lawyers’ letters were served on the police did they release the boxes.

“De Klerk ... described how he put (the boxes) in black plastic bags and sealed them and they were muddy and dirty and whatever — and the

day that we arrived here they were spotless. There are little holes and things that are plugged with wax, and the wax was gone. We did not know whether they’d been opened or X-rayed and the more questions we put to the police the more obtuse they became. So we left here just hoping they would work and ... everything we got from the boxes was excellent.”

So we have a motive and a contaminated investigation. But let’s go one step further and look for a suspect, a modus operandi and a smoking gun. For that we travel to Italy to meet Umberto Fusaroli Casadei.

If you saw Casadei walking down the street, you would hardly give him a second glance. He looks like every other kindly old Italian man you find in the villages of Italy, who adores his grandchildren and passes the days hanging out at the local espresso bars or cheering for his favourite soccer team. But behind this apparent ordinariness is a remarkable story. He has rubbed shoulders with some of Africa’s greatest leaders and survived more than one assassination attempt.

Casadei was just 16 years old when he was forced to watch his father and two uncles being publicly executed by Franco Mussolini’s fascists during World War II in northern Italy. This scarred him for life, and he vowed then to fight oppression in every corner of the globe.

It was this that led him to Samora Machel, whom he fought with against the Portuguese colonialists. After independence he became one of Machel’s most trusted lieutenants, operating in the dangerous world of counter-espionage. Casadei was a double agent, pretending to work for South African military intelligence (MI) while secretly passing crucial

information directly to Machel. He was paid R600 a month by South Africa for his false MI reports, money that ironically went straight into Mozambican government coffers.

One of his regular contacts was a female MI agent whom he has identified but asked that we call simply “Maureen”. It was during a routine meeting with Maureen that Casadei stumbled on the information that South African and Mozambican agents were plotting to kill Machel.

He described how “she asked me if the South Africans could trust the Mozambicans. Because they had asked the South Africans: if they as-

sisted in killing Samora, what would the South Africans do to help those who’d assisted in the murder to take over power in Maputo?”

Now that he knew the identities of the Mozambican officials planning on betraying their leader, Casadei went straight to Machel and begged him to let him kill the two generals. “Samora now knew who was plotting against him, but he refused (to let) me kill them, he did not give me the permit to kill them. And so he gave them time to kill him. This was the big problem,” said Casadei, shaking his head regretfully.

It was not long after this that the crash occurred.

Devastated by the loss of one of his dearest friends, Casadei dedicated himself to investigating the cause of the crash. By 1994 he had collected enough information to go public with his story, speaking out in Mozambican radio interviews and newspaper articles. He linked top Mozambican and South African government officials to the conspiracy to kill Machel and provided critical technical information.

He paid a heavy price for his courage. Assassins opened fire on him on two occasions. The first time, convinced they’d killed him as he sat at the wheel of his Landrover, they taunted him by saying the bullets were a message from the Mozambican generals he’d named as accomplices in the president’s murder. But he survived, driving himself, badly wounded, to hospital.

Several months later another round of bullets was emptied into Casadei’s body and again miraculously he survived. But by now things had become too dangerous, and this time he was forced to flee Mozambique and return to the town of his birth in Northern Italy.

Casadei’s story is reinforced by a foreign intelligence document from

a neighbouring country in the possession of Radio 702. The document names the Malawian, Mozambican and South African agents who conspired in the plot to kill Machel. The Mozambicans named in the report are the very same ones who sent assassins to kill Casadei.

The document states that South Africa was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the technical aspects of the crash. Senior South African generals and a Cabinet minister are named in the report.

South African military intelligence was given the task of recruiting an airport official from Mozambique. According to the report, the airport official was paid a total of R1.5-million to assist the South Africans by switching off either the Maputo radar system or the beacon.

The report states that this person “travelled to Zimbabwe to close the deal with his foreign counterparts with the help of a Mozambican official who got him a medical certificate to justify his absence. Payments were made in two parts ... After the deal the Malawians and the South Africans started to monitor the control tower and the communications in it.”

(Radio 702 is in possession of the dates those payments were made and the banking institutions where the money was deposited. However, this could not be double-checked because the banks concerned do not keep records going that far back.)

The airport official would later ensure that the Maputo beacon and radar system was/were switched off, making it easier to operate a decoy beacon transmitting a signal on the same wavelength as the Maputo beacon.

The report states that on the night of the accident a decoy beacon was used to divert the plane off course.



Samora Machel: ‘Signed his death warrant’

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