

Mbeki raises apartheid plot spectre over Machel death

'Our common enemy' blamed

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FOREIGN SERVICE

Cape Argus
3/5/02

MAPUTO: President Thabo Mbeki lent new credence here to the long-held suspicion in some quarters that apartheid security forces were behind the air crash death of President Samora Machel.

Addressing a special session of the Mozambican parliament yesterday, Mbeki spoke of the "heroic sacrifices" by Mozambicans in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa, and thanked them for "standing shoulder to shoulder with us until we gained our freedom".

In that struggle, he said, Machel had "perished on South African territory at the hands of our common enemy".

Machel was killed in 1986. A theory held in most circles in Maputo is that the aircraft was lured off course by a pirate navigational beacon operated by the apartheid security forces, but a South African commission of inquiry found that the crash was due to pilot

error.

The main purpose of Mbeki's visit was undoubtedly economic.

On Friday, he and Mozambican President Joachim Chissano will inaugurate the construction of a 900km pipeline that will take natural gas from the fields in the province of Inhambane to the chemical plants of Sasol in Secunda.

"This will create much-needed jobs in Mozambique, and supply markets in South Africa," Mbeki said.

He told the Mozambican MPs that with R25 billion invested by South African private and parastatal companies, the country had become the largest foreign investor in Mozambique.

He put at 220 the number of South African businesses at present operating in Mozambique.

Mbeki said that in the near future the Mozambican port and rail company, CFM, would sign an agreement with its South African counterpart, Spoornet, for the "co-management" of the railway from South Africa to Maputo.

This agreement is behind schedule.

When the memorandum of understanding with Spoornet was signed in January, it was hoped that a Spoornet-led consortium would sign a lease to manage the railway by April 1.

Among the matters under discussion between the two governments, Mbeki said, was how to ensure "full use" of the Cahora Bassa hydro-electric dam on the Zambezi, "mainly to the benefit of the people of Mozambique".

He gave no details - but Mozambique has made no secret of its desire to change the shareholding structure of the Cahora Bassa operating company, HCB, which is currently 82% owned by the Portuguese state, and 18% by Mozambique.

It is thought likely that the possibility of South Africa taking a holding in HCB is under discussion.

But this can hardly be resolved without also reviewing the tariff for Cahora Bassa power.

At present Eskom is paying only 3.7 cents per kilowatt hour, a price which HCB regards as ruinously low.