

Chissano rejects Machel death claims

MAPUTO—Mozambique President Joaquim Chissano yesterday dismissed as “absurd” allegations he was involved in the death of the country’s first president in a plane crash 17 years ago.

In a formal reaction published in the state-run Noticias daily, Chissano said the claims by former South African intelligence officer Tienie Groenewald were “absurd and only designed to divert attention from the true culprits”.

At the weekend the Sunday World newspaper carried comments by Groenewald claiming that Chissano helped mastermind the plane crash that killed former president Samora Machel in October 1986.

Machel was flying back to Mozambique from a summit in Zambia when his Russian-built Tupolev aircraft slammed into a hillside inside South Africa after being drawn off course by a private beacon broadcasting on the same frequency as Maputo airport.

He was the country’s first black president after independence from Portugal in 1975 and headed a Marxist-inspired government which was fighting a bitter war with rebels long backed by then white-ruled Rhodesia and South Africa.

Chissano, who was foreign minister at the time of Machel’s death, said Groenewald’s

claim was nonsensical as Mozambique and South Africa held no diplomatic contacts at the time.

The only contact between the two governments were non-aggression pacts sealed directly between Machel and the then South African president, PW Botha, he added.

The Sunday World report has provoked outrage within the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) party.

Teodato Hunguana, a lawmaker and former minister in Machel’s government, said the allegations were intended to deliver the real culprits from their crime “and somehow induce the world into believing that the Mozambicans killed their own president”.

“We consider the news published by the Sunday World absolutely false and aimed at throwing dust into the people’s eyes,” added Frelimo’s secretary for mobilisation and propaganda, Edson Macuacua.

Political analysts here say Chissano may not have been involved in Machel’s assassination, but at the time of his death Machel was facing strong opposition within his party and the military over his socialist style of governance.—Sapa-AFP