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South Africans admit they killed Samora, but say Mozambicans helped

Samora Machel was killed when his plane was drawn off course by a false navigational beacon on 19 October 1986, as Mozambicans have always alleged, a former head of South African military intelligence, General Tienie Groenewald, admitted in an interview in the Sowetan Sunday World on 6 April. A similar technique was apparently also used to cause a plane crash that killed key figures in the Angolan military in 1989.

But Groenewald also claimed that senior Frelimo officials were involved in the killing, and that senior "individuals and [current President Joaquim] Chissano were appraised of the details of the plot to kill Machel." Under pressure, he retracted the claim the following day, but it set off substantial discussion in Maputo.

Not surprisingly, the allegation has brought furious denials in Mozambique. Teodato Hunguana, a leading Frelimo MP, accused Groenewald of "continuing the war of destabilisation." Chissano's spokesman, Antonio Matonse, called the report "absolutely false" and said that "before Samora Machel's death, Chissano had no official or informal contacts with apartheid figures". But Groenewald only said that Chissano knew of the plan, not that he organised it or was in contact with South Africa.

The allegation is not so easily dismissed. Samora Machel's widow, Graca Machel, now the wife of Nelson Mandela, has publicly accused Mozambican "generals" of being involved in the assassination. In 1986, most members of the Politburo had the rank of general. And the late editor Carlos Cardoso was always convinced that Mozambicans were involved in the murder. He argued that Machel was flying at night, against regulations, to attend a meeting the next morning in which he was planning to dismiss senior military officials because of corruption. Some high ranking person tipped off the South Africans about the flight, and they set up the false beacon, Cardoso believed.
(Joseph Hanlon)