

ugnet_ : Why Did General Groenewald Retract?

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Why Did General Groenewald Retract?

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OPINION

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Maputo—The press conference given in Maputo on Wednesday by Gen Tienie Groenewald, former head of South African Military Intelligence under the apartheid regime, raised more questions than it answered, and left most journalists in the room distinctly sceptical about Groenewald's motives.

In an interview with the "Sunday World" of Soweto, published on 6 April, Groenewald had alleged that Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano was somehow involved in the plane crash that killed his predecessor, Samora Machel. But now he has not merely retracted this claim, he has not alleged that he was misunderstood by the "Sunday World"—he has accused the journalist who interviewed him, Mpikelani Duma, of lying.

Groenewald says that the entire 6 April story is fiction, and that he never said anything of the sort to the "Sunday World". Now this is a very serious accusation to make against a journalist, and one which Groenewald has singularly failed to prove.

As a former spymaster, Groenewald must know the importance of taping key conversations. So where is his tape of the interview he gave to Duma?

When AIM asked this question at the press conference, Groenewald at first refused to answer. Then he said he was not aware that any recording or transcript of the interview had been made. No tape recording? We are supposed to believe that on a matter as serious as the murder of a head of state, a man who once headed an intelligence service could not be bothered to make a recording?

AIM assumes that Duma was not so negligent and did make a recording. AIM has sent him an e-mail message asking if a recording exists, and if he can send a copy to Maputo. That should clear up all doubts as to what Groenewald did and did not say during the interview.

The weekly paper "Zambeze" has managed to speak to Duma, who is standing by his story. A "Zambeze" reporter talked to Duma on Wednesday night, shortly before the paper went to press, and Duma said he thought it rather strange that Groenewald was now trying to deny his statements of early April.

As for the Sunday World's failure to publish Groenewald's letter denying the content of the interview, Duma said that, when he received the letter, he proposed to Groenewald that the letter be published alongside a transcript of the interview.

Groenewald rejected this, saying that would “complicate matters still further”.

Duma said that the general asked for “more time to reflect”.

He has had almost two months, and clearly it would now be in the interests of the “Sunday World” to publish the letter alongside the transcript and let readers make up their own minds.

Groenewald has no right to try and prevent the paper from publishing a transcript.

Groenewald has a bloodstained past. In particular, he has been accused of responsibility for the May 1978 massacre of over 500 Namibian refugees at Kassinga in Angola. At the time, he was head of South African Air Force intelligence, and thus in charge of aerial photography, including of targets inside the Front Line States.

At the press conference he admitted that what he called “the Kassinga attack” (the word massacre did not pass his lips) was based on those photographs.

He rose to become director of military intelligence, and was transferred to the Department of Information (part of the apartheid Foreign Ministry) in April 1986. He claimed that in the Information Department, he was doing nothing covert, and that the department had “no intelligence function”. Yet at the same time he admitted that its purpose was a propaganda one, “to boost the morale of the people of South Africa” (i.e. the whites). The appointment of a securocrat to a leading post in the Department of Information merely indicates that at this stage—a high point in apartheid’s regional war—the military was clearly in the ascendant, and overshadowed moderate figures such as Foreign Minister Pik Botha. It certainly does not mean that Groenewald stopped being a spy.

Groenewald was on the far right of the regime, and as it collapsed in the early 1990s, he was one of those who dreamed of setting up a “Boer Republic”—a separatist, Afrikaans-speaking state.

When a man with this past speaks to a newspaper, he does so with a purpose, and not merely because he has become friendly with a journalist and wants “to help him”, as Groenewald claimed on Wednesday.

But why did Groenewald retreat ? Why should he try to unsay his interview ? “Zambeze” suggests that this is part of Groenewald’s attempt to secure an amnesty for his son, Pieter, who was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for murder, in exactly the same week as the interview was published in the “Sunday World”.

Pieter Groenewald was found guilty of murdering three black men in the Pretoria suburb of Mamelodi in 1992, doubtless as part of the wave of violence by the ultra-right in the period leading up to South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994.

The younger Groenewald fled to Portugal (after somehow obtaining a Portuguese passport from the Portuguese embassy in Pretoria), but returned a decade later when his mother fell ill.

But Gen Groenewald claimed that his denial of the “Sunday World” story had nothing to do with his attempts to secure amnesty for his son. In this, he is probably right—given the independence of

the judiciary in South Africa, it is unlikely that any claims or retractions of his about Joaquim Chissano, or any other politician, will make any difference.

A further theory is that Groenewald retracted his story as the price for doing business in Mozambique. He said he was looking for investment opportunities in the timber and tourism industries. If he did not deny the accusation he had made against Chissano, then he would have no business opportunities in Mozambique.

This too is unlikely. For this is not Groenewald's first retraction: an initial, rather short, denial was carried by the South African publication "24 Hours" the day after the "Sunday World" story hit the streets. Groenewald himself pointed out that, if business deals were uppermost in his mind, then he would never have given the interview in the first place. On this issue, at least, his logic seems impeccable.

There is a far more likely source for pressure on Groenewald than either the South African or the Mozambican governments—and that is his own former colleagues in the apartheid military. For while the rest of the world regards the key element in the story as the accusation against Chissano, that may not be how it looks from a South African far right perspective.

The key claim in the "Sunday World" interview is that Chissano was "part of a network of people who collaborated with elements of the apartheid government and the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB—a notorious apartheid death squad) to bring down the plane".

The claim about Chissano has overshadowed the fact that this is the first time that a senior figure from the apartheid military has admitted that the South African government of the time took part in the murder of Samora Machel.

Perhaps Groenewald thought that by dragging in Chissano's name, he was bring clever, and muddying the water. He has certainly, for the time being, succeeded in distracting attentions in Mozambique. Yet the fact remains that an apartheid general was quoted as saying that the apartheid regime killed a foreign head of state.

Perhaps this set off panic buttons among other former apartheid securocrats, who thought that Groenewald would have done better to keep his mouth shut. It may well be these figures who ordered him to issue a retraction.

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