

Harare: fears about M'bique security

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PRESIDENT Samora Machel's as yet unexplained death on Sunday has thrust the Frontline states and the nine-nation Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) into a serious crisis.

The effect of Machel's death has been to cast further doubt on the stability of Mozambique's Frelimo government and, hence, the security of crucial non-South African trade routes.

The timing and uncertain circumstances of the crash have also raised serious questions over the lengths to which the Pretoria government may be prepared to go to prevent its neighbours from exercising a meaningful degree of political and economic independence.

Added to Machel's death is that of Alcantare Santos, Mozambique's Transport Minister, a key figure in the SADCC's transport commission.

The deaths are particularly serious for Zimbabwe, the economic and industrial hub of the Frontline states

and the SADCC.

Zimbabwe Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's government has pinned its slim hopes of reducing trade route dependency on South Africa, and thereby of surviving sanctions in reasonable shape, on the Mutare-Beira corridor.

The passage is currently being guarded against attacks by the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) by more than 5 000 Zimbabwean troops, with Frelimo's agreement. The corridor carries a fuel pipeline, road and railway, and would be Zimbabwe's major trade artery if South Africa closed its borders.

Attempts to upgrade the capacity of the corridor are being hampered by the security situation, which has deteriorated considerably in northern Mozambique since late September when Malawi, apparently giving way

to pressure from the Frontline states to end support for the MNR, "expelled" several thousand MNR fighters, who entered the northern Mozambique provinces of Tete and Zambesia some 150km north of the Mutare-Beira corridor.

Two other railways to Mozambican ports — from Zimbabwe's south east to Maputo and from Malawi to Nacala — are out of action as a result of MNR attacks.

The installation of a South African client MNR government in Maputo would be a devastating blow to Zimbabwe, the Frontline states, the SADCC and the entire campaign for sanctions against Pretoria. It would also substantially change the character of the growing war in Southern Africa.

There has been some reasoned speculation in recent weeks that the South African military's objectives on Mozambique have shifted from merely destabilising Frelimo via the MNR, to actually replacing it as

government. The loss of the charismatic Machel would serve the strategy suggested in this scenario.

At the time of the fatal plane crash, Machel was returning from a confrontation he, Kaunda and Angola's President Jose Eduardo dos Santos had held with Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko over the latter's continued support for South African and US-backed Unita forces. The scale of Unita's activities has rendered inoperable the railway line from Zambia's copperbelt, through southern Zaire to the Angolan port of Benguela, a natural route for Zambian and Zairean trade.

Its closure means the use of more distant South African railways and ports.

That confrontation was further proof of the extent to which the political, military and economic struggles between South Africa and its black-ruled neighbours are now wholly interdependent.