

No, SA does not stand to gain from the death

By PATRICK LAURENCE

THE death of President Samora Machel of Mozambique raises the question of whether South Africa's white rulers stand to benefit in any way from the removal of the charismatic leader.

To pose the question is not to infer that the crash was the work of South African agents.

Judging from a background talk last week with a top official, South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs will certainly not be secretly pleased by the death of the former male nurse who became first a Frelimo guerrilla leader and then Mozambique's founding president.

Machel was seen as a pragmatist, with whom Pretoria had been able to strike a deal in the past, as at the Nkomati Accord of March 1984.

The view in the Department of Foreign Affairs was that a deal could be reached again in the form of top level talks to revitalise the all-but-moribund Nkomati Accord, under which South Africa undertook not to support the rebel movement Renamo, in return for an undertaking by Mozambique not to back the outlawed African National Congress.

The hope in Pretoria was that Machel could be persuaded to revive the committees which had been set up under the Nkomati Accord to deal with problems between the countries, including those sparked by the accusations that South Africa was covertly supporting Renamo and counter-accusations that Mozambique was again allowing ANC guerrillas to operate from its territory.

It is relevant to note that only last week President PW Botha had expressed the hope that the Nkomati pact could be revived for the sake of regional peace. Botha made the point in the heart of the ultra-right wing stronghold of Potgietersrus at about the same time as his neo-nazi foe, Eugene Terre'blanche, was calling for



A Mozambican soldier and SA policemen search wreckage of the ill-fated Tupolev that crashed on Monday, killing President Samora Machel and 33 others. A survivor, Joao Renderson (right) is treated in Nelspruit hospital. Pictures by Wendy Schwegmann, Reuter, and Walter Dhladhla, AFP.

tougher action against Machel and his Frelimo government.

Seen against that background, Botha's espousal of the Nkomati Accord cannot be dismissed as mere cant or Machiavellian deception.

Analysts in South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs further anticipated that Machel, under the threat of escalating civil war at home — signalled by the fall to rebels of towns in northern Mozambique — was considering peace talks with Renamo.

But they believed he would first have to face and overcome resistance from the radical wing in his cabinet.

There were two further axioms to the thinking in the Union Buildings, where the Department of Foreign Affairs has its headquarters.

The first was that Machel was the only man strong enough to carry through the talks, an appraisal endorsed by diplomatic observers.

The second was that neither side could win in the war and some kind of political compromise was necessary.

South Africa's Foreign Affairs department yearned, it seemed, once again to play the role of peace-maker, as it did in October 1984 when it persuaded both Frelimo and Renamo to sign the Pretoria Declaration.

In that largely forgotten declaration, both sides pledged themselves to work for a cessation of armed conflict and for a political solution.

The compromise rested on an important premise. It was spelt out in article one of the Pretoria Declaration. It read: "Samora Moises

Machel is acknowledged as the President of the People's Republic of Mozambique." It was hardly evidence of hostility toward Machel.

Later, after the collapse of the peace talks, Renamo was to castigate South Africa's Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, as an "unconditional ally" of Machel's government.

Similar sentiments were expressed in Renamo notebooks captured by Frelimo troops who overran Renamo's main base at Goronzona in August last year. The notebooks were later released to the press in Maputo by Frelimo.

But the notebooks, which were written by secretaries of the Renamo leader, Alfonso Dhlakama, also contained entries of a different sort. They purported to convey messages from the then Chief of the South African Defence Force, General Constand Viljoen, to Dhlakama, assuring him that "Renamo still has friends in the South Africa military".

The entries struck a responsive cord in the minds of many observers who had long suspected the SA Defence Force — or sections of it, particularly in the Department of Military Intelligence — of covertly supporting Renamo in defiance of the Nkomati Accord.

South Africa's military — as distinct from police — leaders are believed to have been less enthusiastic about dealing with Machel as a self-proclaimed Marxist.

Their view, it is conjectured, was that there was no point to concluding a truce with Marxists: that they should be destroyed and defeated, not feted as potential allies.

The military view of Machel as a Marxist who could not change his ideological spots was seemingly confirmed by the resurgence of ANC activity from Mozambique since the beginning of the year. According to the Minister of Defence, General Magnus Malan, the recent border land mine explosion was the 23rd attack on South Africa from Mozambique since January.

Significantly it was Malan who led the verbal attack on Machel in the wake of the land mine blast. The psychological assault was the prelude to economic war, as manifest by Pretoria's decision to terminate the recruitment of thousands of Mozambican workers and to repatriate all those lawfully in South Africa as soon as their contracts expire.

Thus there may be men in South African military circles who are pleased to see the end of Machel. But it does not automatically mean they were responsible for his death.

If there is rejoicing, it is as likely to be pleasure at Machel's bad luck as at a sabotage mission successfully accomplished.

As a well-placed diplomat remarked, it is hard to see how Machel's death will benefit South Africa. His potential successors and co-members of the Frelimo politburo — the diplomats named are Joaquin Chissano, Marcelino Dos Santos and Sergio Vergio — are likely to adopt a harder line toward South Africa.