



OF course, just about the only topic for discussion in southern Africa this week has been Mozambican President Samora Machel's tragic death in a plane crash in the Lebombo Mountains.

Millions of words have been written about the crash, the possible causes and the implications for the region, but little attention has been given to one of the central ironies of the situation.

On the basis of the facts now available, it seems that the South African Government has acted impeccably.

It advised the Mozambican Government as soon as was reasonably possible and it assisted top Mozambicans to visit the crash site, to deal with the dead and the injured and to begin their investigation into the crash. It ensured that the vital flight recorder was sealed and it announced an investigation that would involve South African, Mozambican and Russian experts, together with representatives of the International Civil Aviation Association. Everything possible was done for the survivors.

Machel: SA can't win with the lynch mob

Additionally, South Africa is giving the Soviet Government access to the Soviet pilot of the crashed plane who was being treated in a South African military hospital. It has also allowed the pilot's wife to visit him.

Those of us who cover this troubled region of ours know that the South African Government mostly plays according to its own rules. So, when it does play the game according to widely-accepted international rules, perhaps it should get some credit.

But, what has happened?

Zimbabwe's state-owned or state-controlled media have blamed South Africa for the crash, claiming the Mozambican jet was "shot down". No wonder, then, that Zimbabwean students ran riot on Tuesday, burning the South African Airways office in Harare, stoning the South African Trade Mission in Harare and attacking the Malawi High Commission, the Air Malawi offices and the American Embassy.

Marginally more circumspect, the African National Congress in Lusaka accused the South African Government of being "directly or indirectly" responsible for President Machel's death. It said that, until the contrary was proved, the ANC would contend that either South Africa or its Mozambique Resistance Movement "proxies" caused the crash.

Later, Zambia's President Kenneth Kaunda said South Africa was guilty of playing a part in President Machel's death "unless a team of international experts prove it innocent".

On Wednesday, University of Botswana students handed the Minister for Presidential Affairs, Mr P Kedikilwe, a letter in which they accused South Africa of an "act of international terrorism".

In many other different parts of the world, covertly or overtly, South Africa has been blamed for the crash and, in all places where they are active, anti-apartheid groups will try to use the crash to add to the international pressure on South Africa.

At worst, they will claim South Africa, either directly or working through the MNR, caused the crash. At best, there will be the argument that President Machel would never have been in the plane if he had not been forced to hold international discussions aimed at limiting the activities of the MNR "bandits" which Mozambique still insists are being supported by the South African Government.

Unfortunately, the reaction to the crash does little more than confirm an international attitude in terms of which the South African Government is damned, no matter what action it takes.

When South Africa does act correctly, it gets little or no credit for so doing.

This, in turn, just adds to the South African Government's determination to do its own thing and to hell with the consequences.

If and until the facts prove otherwise, South Africa should be regarded as innocent — no matter what the South African Government's perceived record in Southern Africa may be.

And, from the South African point of view, the more international involvement it can get in the crash investigation, the better it will be for everybody. □ — *John D'Oliveira is Editor of The Star's Africa News Service.*