

The Cape Times

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Neighbourly relations

THE South African Defence Force has once again dealt its own credibility a severe blow by declaring in a statement by an official Defence Force spokesman that there is no point in reacting to "unsubstantiated claims" about South African support for the MNR movement which is fighting a guerilla war against the Machel government of Mozambique. To deny something, in effect, which credible Western newspapers and institutions do not doubt for a moment is true is to reduce your own credibility in the world and among your own well-informed citizens to zero. Such a proceeding is hardly in the interests of the SADF, which needs to enjoy the trust and confidence of the South African public at least. Neither is it in the national interest in the conduct of foreign relations.

The fact is that the frequently made "claims" in question are by no means "unsubstantiated" as far as Western media and institutions are concerned. The history of the MNR, which was founded by Mr Ian Smith's intelligence chief during the counter-insurgency campaign in Rhodesia, is well-known. It is public knowledge in the Western world and among people

everywhere who follow southern African affairs. While the Cape Times has no independent sources of information on the subject, are we to doubt a considered statement by the United States government? The State Department in Washington is officially on record as stating that South Africa is the largest backer of the MNR. So what is the point of the denials? It is no doubt embarrassing for the staunchly anti-terrorist Botha administration to be saddled with ultimate responsibility for acts of terrorism and sabotage in a neighbouring state. If the MNR is a South African surrogate and an end-justifies-the-means approach is in fact government policy, as part of the campaign against the ANC, it would be better to admit it. The rationale of such a policy, we presume, would be that support for the MNR is a means of bringing pressure to bear on the Machel government to desist from supporting the ANC. The best course is to speak the truth. The embarrassment, while serious, would not be half so damaging to the national interest as the body blows dealt to Defence Force credibility by inept statements to the media.