

Russian planes based at Mmabatho airport may be transporting Armscor weapons to Angola via Zaire.

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RUSSIAN Antonov transport planes, based at Bophuthatswana's Mmabatho airport, are being chartered by Armscor to ferry arms to Zaire and other African countries, according to a senior official in South Africa's Directorate of Civil Aviation.

There are fears that these arms are finding their way to Unita forces fighting pitched battles with government troops in Angola.

The *Weekly Mail* this week visited the airport and found an Antonov 12, with a capacity of 17 tons, parked and ready for use. The aircraft had just returned from a trip to Kinshasa, Zaire.

Another senior source in the aviation industry, who asked to remain anonymous, said: "There are a lot of operations out of Mmabatho airport. Funny things are happening there. There are a lot of Antonovs flying into Zaire."

Asked about the cargo on these flights, the source said: "You can use your imagination, but it's obviously armaments."

Armscor spokesman Henry Abdoll yesterday acknowledged that the state-owned armaments company was involved in the sale of arms and other equipment to African countries, but

Bop planes 'ferrying arms to Unita forces'



Ready for use ... A Russian Antonov 12 stands at Mmabatho airport

Photo: KEVIN CARTER

denied that the Bop-based Antonovs had been used for this purpose.

The South African Communist Party this week said it had been informed by foreign diplomats that Safair, South Africa's main cargo aviation company, was chartering the Antonovs to deliver

arms to Unita.

This appears to be incorrect. Safair yesterday issued a statement saying it had never leased any Antonov aircraft and that it would "under no circumstances whatsoever violate any foreign country's airspace".

But the disclosures by the South African civil aviation official, who spoke off the record, may provide some backing for the SACP's claims that "regular nightly flights from Mmabatho airport of Antonov transport planes" were made to south-western

Zaire with the purpose of supplying arms to Unita.

The evidence indicates that the Antonovs flying out of Mmabatho belong to a company called Africa Aeroflot. A spokesman for the firm confirmed that the Antonov seen at Mmabatho this week had been flying to Zaire. He denied it had been chartered by Armscor and said it was flying "on purely commercial missions" and had returned to Mmabatho "because it developed technical problems".

The spokesman added that he had heard of another Antonov, not owned by his company, which was doing "non-commercial work from Lanseria, maybe for Armscor".

Bophuthatswana's Civil Aviation Director, Dermott MacLaughlin, claimed the homeland had given permission for the Antonovs to be used for, among other things, cargo haulage and "mercy missions" to Sudan, Ethiopia and Mozambique, under United Nations auspices.

Ten Africa Aeroflot-owned cargo aircraft have at various times flown to and from Mmabatho since May 1992, using Russian crews and equipment. MacLaughlin said such equipment is cheap but "not energy-efficient."

He did not explain how the notoriously petrol-hungry Antonovs could fly as far as north Sudan, nor why the UN had chosen an unrecognised homeland as its base for mercy missions so far afield.

Comment from the UN's World Food Programme responsible for flying relief aid to famine-stricken parts of Africa was not available at the time of going to press.

Africa Aeroflot was given permission to use Mmabatho airport by Rowan Cronje, Minister for Defence, State Affairs and Civil Administration in the Bophuthatswana government.

MacLaughlin confirmed that C130 cargo planes, "chartered by mining companies and aid agencies", had flown from Bophuthatswana to Angola before last year's elections.

The Africa Aeroflot spokesman, a Russian called Mark who refused to give his surname, said his company was working closely with the UN and the Red Cross, and that they had four planes in Mozambique.

South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs said it was "unaware of any unauthorised flights to Angola".

According to the South African civil aviation official, the Antonovs are given landing rights and parking by the Bophuthatswana government, "and are being chartered directly by Armscor and by other African countries to fly Armscor-produced arms out of the country and to other African countries."

"This is useful to Armscor because it means their arms are being transported by Russian aircraft, which are far less conspicuous. Their crews are always waiting on standby. Because they are based in Bophuthatswana, they don't need South African work permits or South African pilot's licences, and we have no jurisdiction over them." He would not say to which African countries the arms were being ferried.

The route passes over Bophuthatswana, Botswana and northern Namibia, and does not include South African airspace, allowing the South African government to claim ignorance of these operations.

Mmabatho airport is fast gaining a reputation for being a gun-running centre. The *Weekly Mail* reported last year that international gunrunners had chartered a Ugandan Boeing 747 to fly Armscor weapons into Yugoslavia and that the plane had landed at Mmabatho to pick up the cargo.