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Last week's murder in Lisbon of MNR leader Mr Evo Fernandes is a major blow to the rebels who are facing increased international isolation and internal dissent. If reports of close connections between Mr Fernandes and the South African military are true, then his death is also a setback to South African influences within the organisation. Mr Fernandes was said to keep close contacts with SA and recently it was reported that he had been in the country earlier this year. Mr Fernandes is the second founding leader of the MNR to be murdered.

In 1983 the MNR's secretary-general Mr Orlando Cristina was murdered in Pretoria, less than a year before SA signed the Nkomati Accord with Mozambique. After Mr Cristina's death Mr Fernandes became the MNR's secretary-general but had to abandon the post in 1986 following accusations that his past links with the Portuguese colonial authorities and his connections with SA were harming the organisation. Mr Fernandes was then appointed head of the MNR's research department. Last year he again assumed a prominent position in the organisation following in-fighting between different MNR factions jockeying for influence over the movement's unsophisticated leader Mr Alfonso Dhlakama. Two MNR leaders who were known to have opposed Mr Fernandes, Mr Joao Ataide and Mr Mateus Lopes, were killed in mysterious circumstances in Malawi in December last year after a visit to Mr Dhlakama's headquarters inside Mozambique ... Shortly after their deaths the MNR's Lisbon spokesman Mr Paulo Oliveira was dismissed. Earlier this year he defected to Mozambique. At a press conference in Maputo Mr Oliveira said Mr Fernandes kept close contacts with South African military intelligence which had installed communications equipment at the MNR offices in Lisbon ...

The Mozambican authorities denied any involvement and pointed to the in-fighting within the MNR leadership which has also spilled over to the MNR forces in Mozambique. MNR representatives in Washington had publicly contested Mr Fernandes's control of the organisation. Sources in Lisbon however, said it is known that Mr Alexandre Chagas, the man who took Mr Fernandes out to dinner the night he disappeared, was being used by the Mozambican authorities for unofficial contacts with the MNR.

They said Mr Chagas had invited Mr Fernandes to a restaurant near Mr Fernandes's home on Sunday, to tell him there were Mozambican officials interested in reopening negotiations with the MNR. The two men were seen leaving the restaurant with a third man who the restaurant owner presumed was the chauffeur of the car in which they left. Mr Chagas has not been seen since ... Mr Fernandes, a lawyer, was considered the main strategist behind the MNR's diplomacy. He was also a hardliner who had been blamed for the failure of the October 1984 peace talks in Pretoria mediated by SA. He was found dead with 'at least four gunshot wounds' in his head ...

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