Putting the blame on us

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RECENT incidents in adjoining states could cause serious repercussions inside and outside their own borders. This country cannot afford to ignore the fact that it is with these states that it must one day find an accord, or face a future of escalating hostility.

This week a letter bomb killed Professor Ruth First — ANC executive, named communist and proponent of violence — in her university office in Maputo. An immediate response was to blame South Africa. Last week a bomb blasted a train in northern Mozambique, killing 14. Official "credit" was claimed by the Mozambique Resistance Movement, which the Mozambique Government insists is backed by South Africa.

From Lesotho, in the wake of the killing of a Cabinet Minister by the underground Lesotho Liberation Army, comes the oft-repeated charge that South Africa is providing assistance to the rebels. The Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Mr Robert Mugabe, has frequently claimed that South African agents are trying to destabilise his country. When military planes were blown up on an airfield several weeks ago there were dark suggestions of South African involvement.

Official Angolan sources regularly proclaim aggression by South African troops across the border. Almost as regularly, these claims are cursorily dismissed. Regrettably, sometimes they have turned out to be correct.

We understand that it could be politically expedient for neighbouring states to try to put the blame for many ills upon South Africa. It is an easy way out. More than ever, then, it emphasises the need for constant public commitment to the official policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states. This policy is — and always has been — an admirable one. It is the only one that can be consistently defended in the international arena.

Unfortunately, we have to face the fact that ill-considered actions and responses sometimes damage our credibility. For instance, the appalling military role in last year's attempted Seychelles coup did immense harm because it invited speculation about how serious could be the policy of non-intervention if senior military men thought it could be expanded to embrace assisting in a freelance revolution.

The temptation to engage in destabilisation tactics may be strong for some, especially where neighbouring states harbour known enemies. This simply means, however, that the Government has got to work twice as hard at proclaiming its official policy — and be trebly vigilant in seeing that it is carried out.