Robert Kirby's article on the Samora Machel crash (June 19 to 25) is devoid of any context. He writes as if South Africa in 1986 was a perfectly normal society, with a judicial system above reproach and a defence force that would never stoop to dirty tricks. Those at the receiving end of apartheid's evil deeds used no convincing as to what this country's former rulers were capable of.

South Africa was perfectly capable of killing Mozambican president Samora Machel, and in fact had tried on several occasions to assassinate him. Furthermore, the South African Defence Force (SADF) was equipped with sophisticated beacon equipment that was part of its covert operations used during the Angolan war.

One has to ask why South Africa always hounded Judge Cecil Magoro whenever it needed to conduct a sensitive aviation inquiry. At the time of the crash, the SADF was under suspicion. The mere fact that Judge Magoro was an honorary colonel with ties to the old South African Air Force was reason enough for him to excuse himself from the inquiry into the Machel crash. But during the apartheid days, it was customary for the accused to investigate themselves.

Kirby dazzles and bamboozles reporters with complicated, technical jargon. But he has only regurgitated what they were doing during a commission of inquiry that — at best — chose to ignore critical evidence.

What did the South Africans have to gain by killing Machel? Kirby argues that "with Samora Machel's death South Africa was much diminished. We lost a neighbour of imagination, purpose and optimism. With the former Machel signed, a new chapter of cooperation had been opened. There was nothing to gain, even for the apartheid regime."

In terms of the Komati Accord, the African National Congress was unceremoniously booted out of Mozambique and South Africa agreed to stop all military and logistical support for the rebel Mozambican group Renamo.

But history tells a different story. Machel had entered into a pact with the devil and signed what many would argue was his own death warrant. The accord was a charade. South Africa had no intention of living up to it. Even as leaders of the two countries were shaking hands, supplies were being flown to Renamo. Pretoria was beefing up its Casa Banana base in Gorongosa. And when Casa Banana was captured by Fretilin a year after the accord, documents left behind showed that Machel had been cheated.

Supplies continued to be flown into the base, an airstrip had been built there and one of its most frequent visitors was South Africa's deputy foreign minister Louis Nel. South Africa also initiated Renamo operations out of bases in Malawi, which had become a focal point for destabilisation. Mozambican protests to Malawi culminated in a visit to Blantyre on September 11 1986 by Machel, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe.

In his book Machel of Mozambique Ian Christie writes: "When Machel set out on that trip he was angry. He detested [Malawi president Hastings] Banda and had on several occasions described him in my presence as a fascist."

During a two-hour meeting, a furious Machel presented Banda with a dossier containing evidence of active support for Renamo by Malawi and South Africa. The document included a photograph of a Malawian passport issued to Renamo leader Alonso Ethikana.

On his return to Maputo, Machel left off steam at a media conference where he told journalists: "We will place missiles along the border with Malawi if support has been set out to do this. And we will close the border to traffic between Malawi and South Africa going through Mozambique."

That was a serious threat: an average of 10 trucks a day were passing through Mozambique's Tete province on the international route to the ports of South Africa.

Shortly after the meeting, Renamo launched a three-pronged conventional military invasion of Mozambique from Malawi. The invading military columns were led by white soldiers believed to be members of the South African Special Forces (recce).

And that's when Machel drove another nail into his coffin. During a visit to the province of Tete, which borders Mozambique, he said: "The Malawian authorities have made their country a base for mercenaries of various nationalities, but principally South African soldiers. I think president Banda is not responsible. I think ministers, soldiers, members of the police and the Malawian security forces have been bought by the South Africans and other countries I don't want to name now, although there is evidence of this."

Machel was planning to fire several of his generals for profiting from the war with Renamo, but never lived to carry this out.

On October 6 1986, General Magalhaes threatened Machel personally, failing to remove a landmine explosion near the area where Machel's plane would crash 15 days later.

"If president Machel chooses landmines, South Africa will react accordingly. If he allows a Moscow-inspired revolutionary war against South Africa, he must also be prepared to take responsibility. If he chooses terrorism and revolution, he will clash head on with South Africa," warned the general.

The stage had been set for an attempt on Machel's life, but as his widow Graça Machel has said: "We never expected South Africa to go after the president's plane."

And so it was on October 19, in a dark, still night in Mbuji-Mayi, a Tupolev 134 crashed into hilly terrain, killing Machel and 31 others.

Only nine people survived the accident.

One of the first people on the scene of the crash site was a local resident who, fearing for his safety, will only give his name as Mike. Because he knew the area well and was able to negotiate the difficult mountainous terrain, he was taken some of the crash by local police.

"To his surprise, he found securities police already on the scene. The injured were crying and moaning, the plane wreckage was scattered all over. I was the only one who was a civilian."

Nobody seemed particularly concerned about providing much-needed medical assistance, he says. Instead, police were searching for "evidence." The commanding officer ordered the survivors to tell them where Samora Machel was. "I don't know what they told them, but they went back to the wreckage and came back with a briefcase and put it on top of one of the car's boots and started searching. I knew it. If I found me I would be in big trouble because we were doing something unlawful. They were not supposed to search the briefcase."

The next day Mike was forced to go into hiding because SAPOL soldiers repeatedly visited his home looking for him.

A crash survivor, Mike's chief bodyguard Fernando Manhoto, later admitted documents had been removed from the wreckage, providing details of a planned Mozambican military invasion against Malawi.

When he returned to the crash site, he found that "the South Africans were not at all concerned with the lives of the wounded. They were just messing around with the other things there." Judo was furious with the South Africans for "refusing to take the wounded to hospital."

The then foreign affairs minister, Pik Botha, later admitted documents had been removed from the wreckage, providing details of a planned Mozambican military invasion against Malawi.

"Yes, technically that would have been a violation of diplomatic practice, certainly. But this was done probably to find out what was being discussed, but with respect this has nothing to do with the crash or the causes of the crash."

Colonel Des Lynch was succeeded from the South African Air Force to assist with the probe into the crash. For the record, he says he's convinced the crash was caused by pilot error. But he has strong words about the way police and the Department of Foreign Affairs conducted themselves.

"If the first moment that the news was broken by the minister of foreign affairs on the SABC at Tam
his own death warrant

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Very foreign affairs: Pik Botha leaves court after giving evidence to the Machel crash inquiry. PHOTOGRAPHE TREvor samson

Samora Machel: "Signed his death warrant"

Samora now knew who was plotting against him, but he refused [to let] me kill them, he did not give me the permit to kill them. And so he gave them time to kill him. This was the big problem," said Casadei, shaking his head regretfully.

It was this that led him to Samantha. If the South Africans could trust the Mozambicans to provide a message from the Mozambican officials planning to kill Machel, the South Africans would be able to trust the Mozambicans to kill Machel and provide crucial technical information.

The report states that this person "travelled to Zimbabwe to close the deal with his foreign counterparts with the help of a Mozambican official who got him a medical certificate to justify his absence. Payments were made in two parts... After the deal the Malawians and the South Africans started to monitor the control tower and the communications in it."

(Radio 702 is in possession of the dates those payments were made and the banking institutions where the money was deposited. However, this could not be double-checked because the banks concerned do not keep records going that far back.)

The airport official was paid a total of R1,5 million to assist the South Africans by switching off either the Maputo radar system or the beacon.

The document states that South Africa was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the technical aspects of the crash. Senior South African generals and a Cabinet minister are named in the report.

South African military intelligence was given the task of recruiting an airport official from Mozambique. According to the report, the airport official was paid a total of R1,5 million to assist the South Africans by switching off either the Maputo radar system or the beacon.

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