Apartheid General's Claims Dismissed As False

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Mozambicans who worked closely with the country's first president, Samora Machel, have dismissed as entirely false the claims by an apartheid era general, published in the South African "Sunday World" paper, that the current president Joaquim Chissano, and other members of the Frelimo Political Bureau, were involved in the murder of Machel.

Machel died on 19 October 1986 when the presidential aircraft, returning from a summit in Zambia, was lured away from its correct flight path, and crashed into a hillside at Mbuzini, just inside South Africa.

It has always been suspected that the South African military used electronic interference to lure the plane to its doom. The dominant theory among Mozambican officials ever since 1986 has been that a false navigation beacon (known as a VOR) was set up somewhere in the Mbuzini region, broadcasting on the same frequency as the Maputo VOR.

The sensational claim in the "Sunday World" came from a tainted source—General Tienie Groenewald, who was once head of South African military intelligence.

Groenewald claimed that Chissano was "part of a network of people who collaborated with elements of the apartheid government and the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB—a notorious apartheid death squad) to bring down the plane".

"These individuals and Chissano were appraised of the plot to kill Machel by the apartheid government and the securocrats", said Groenewald. "I know because I was once a director of military intelligence, before I left and joined the Bureau of Information in 1986".

Groenewald claimed he had "two impeccable sources in Maputo" (neither of which he named) who could corroborate that "senior Frelimo Party political bureau members including Chissano and his henchmen were familiar with the plan to execute Machel".

In fact the Political Bureau consisted of just 11 people (including Machel himself), all of whom could be described as "senior". One Political Bureau member of the time was Jorge Rebelo, then head of the Frelimo Ideology Department. He told AIM on Monday "I have no basis at all for believing in this story".

Certainly nobody had ever discussed a plot to kill Machel with him.

Sergio Vieira, who was Security Minister in 1986, said "any attempt to involve Mozambicans, any Mozambicans and not just Chissano, is an attempt to kick sand in our eyes, and distract our attentions".

"It's just a way of the apartheid officials saying "it wasn't us", he added. "This story has no basis in fact".

Teodato Hunguana, who was Information Minister in 1986, noted that as bit by bit more revelations about the crash come to light, the net is beginning to close on the apartheid operatives responsible. "So this is an attempt to wriggle out of it", he told AIM. "They're trying to thrust the responsibility onto the shoulders of others".

Hunguana was sure that Groenewald knew the truth. "He's a participant in the design and execution of the plan", he said.

"But it's one thing to know the truth, another how you make use of it".

Most of Groenewald's claims are just general accusations.

But he makes one specific claim, and here he can be shown to be lying. Groenewald said

"the shutting down of the Maputo navigational beacon was supervised by a top officer of the Mozambican Air Force".

But the beacon was not shut down at all. It continued to operate all night.

"There were planes in the air using the beacon", Sergio Vieira recalled. "We were in contact with the LAM (Mozambique Airlines) flight coming in from Beira. We told the LAM plane to wait because we were expecting the presidential plane".

The apartheid plan did not involve switching off the Maputo beacon, Vieira argues. Instead they just installed a more powerful beacon which swamped the signal from the Maputo VOR. Since he was in charge of security, part of Vieira's job involved meeting South African intelligence officials, including Groenewald. He told AIM that the last time he saw Groenewald was in Pretoria in 1994, shortly before South Africa's first democratic elections.

In theory Groenewald was retired, but he rang Vieira up and invited him to lunch. Vieira accepted and found himself in a restaurant on the outskirts of Pretoria where the only people in sight were obviously security figures, including a couple of generals and a far right member of the white parliament.

After lunch, over coffee, the purpose of the meeting became clear when one of those present asked Vieira "in the event that we establish a Boer Republic, would Maputo be our lifeline, as it was in Kruger's time?" Vieira suggested that they should ask the question to the United Nations Security Council. Groenewald's far right, separatist politics saw him elected in 1994 as an MP for the Freedom Front, the extreme right party set up by the former chief of staff of the South African Defence Force (SADF), Constand Viljoen.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the "Sunday World" story comes right at the end where lawyer Dumisa Ntsebenza, former head of investigation for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), is cited as saying that Groenewald's story sounded "credible". Ntsebenza said it was "now clear why the Frelimo Central Committee had not undertaken an analysis of Machel's death".

"That's a lie too", remarked Vieira. "The Central Committee studied the matter several times and heard several reports". A commission of inquiry was set up, chaired by Armando Guebuza, then Transport Minister, and now Frelimo general secretary. The commission was never formally wound up, said Vieira, but it was never able to complete its work because of obstruction by the apartheid regime. Over the objections of Mozambique and the Soviet Union (involved as the country of manufacture of the plane), South Africa pressed ahead with its own carefully orchestrated inquiry chaired by judge Cecil Margo. Predictably, that inquiry blamed the crash on pilot error, and after it was concluded, the South Africans refused to co-operate any further with Guebuza's commission.

Commenting on Ntsebenza's claim, Teodato Hunguana remarked "The problem is not analysing—it was always clear that the responsibility lay with the apartheid regime, We had that analysis right away. What is necessary is to investigate how the facts occurred, and that investigation also has to be done in South Africa".

The largest hole in the Groenewald story is that, if "Chissano and his henchmen" cooperated with "the securocrats" in assassinating Samora Machel, why was there no improvement in relations between Maputo and Pretoria once Samora was out of the way?

For as from late 1986, what Groenewald calls "Chissano and his henchmen" were in power. Why did they make no moves to regularise relations with Pretoria ? In fact, by mid-1987 apartheid Defence Minister Magnus Malan was making public threats against Chissano, and the Mozambican government was blaming Pretoria for a series of massacres carried out by the Renamo rebels in the south of the country.

These events are simply inexplicable if Chissano and other political bureau members had indeed co-operated with the apartheid regime to kill Machel.