Samora Machel remembered

Southern Africa this October commemorates the 25th anniversary of the death of Mozambique’s first president Samora Moises Machel who died in a plane crash in 1986.

Machel and 34 others, including some of his closest aides and advisors, died when the presidential plane, returning from a summit in Zambia, crashed at Mbuizi in Southern Africa on 19 October 1986.

The cause of the crash has not been officially determined, although circumstantial evidence points to a false navigational beacon placed by the former apartheid regime in Southern Africa to draw the plane off course, away from the Maputo flight path and toward the hills at Mbuizi.

Born on 29 September 1933 in the southern Mozambican village of Chilembene, in what is now Chokwe district of Gaza province, Machel was hailed for his charismatic and strong leadership in the face of settler and colonial domination and oppression across Southern Africa.

After taking up the leadership of the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) from its first president, Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane, who was assassinated by Portuguese security agents in 1969, and leading the liberation struggle from the battlefront against Portuguese colonialism, Machel became the first President of Mozambique at independence on 25 June 1975.

A few months later, in March 1976, he closed Mozambique’s 1200-km border with the then Southern Rhodesia, in line with United Nations sanctions, and cut off the lucrative transport of goods from the interior to his country’s railways and ports.

Frelimo was already accommodating liberation fighters from Zimbabwe in its bases in the liberated zones of Mozambique since 1972, especially in Tete province where they had ready access to the border crossing.

The firm and active support from Machel, Frelimo and Mozambique continued until Zimbabwe won its independence on 18 April 1980.

When the war in Rhodesia escalated to the extent of several rounds of negotiations, Mozambican officials were present on the sidelines. At the Lancaster House talks in London in 1979, Mozambique played an active role in encouraging a settlement.

Renamo, formed and trained at Odzi in Rhodesia, near the Mozambique border, was moved, complete with weapons, supplies and training officers, to South Africa during the transition to Zimbabwe’s independence and continued its activities from new bases at Phalaborwa.

Machel was eloquent and outspoken on the subject of liberation in Southern Africa and especially against apartheid in South Africa. Having won Mozambique, he believed that anything was possible, including a victory over apartheid in South Africa.

His high profile stance against colonialism and white minority rule, however, made him a threat to those in power in South Africa at the time.

October 1986 was at the height of new activity by the African National Congress (ANC) in the townships of South Africa, with cadres moving in and out of Mozambique, and at the height of the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) activities in Mozambique, moving in from South Africa and from Kamuzu Banda’s Malawi.

This came less than three years after the high-profile signing of the Nkomati Accord by Machel and apartheid South Africa’s P.W. Botha in March 1984, when Mozambique’s survival depended on a non-aggression pact with South Africa. In practice, both sides continued with their objectives, and this had again reached a crescendo with a series of related events in October 1986.