

Guerilla leader who radiated dignity

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By Andrew Mutandwa

ON a warm morning of August 4 1980, the air at Harare International Airport was charged with excitement and great expectation. The legendary Samora Machel was coming — the first ever official state visit by a foreign head of state to independent Zimbabwe.

The Cde Machel I knew and whose image is forever imprinted in my memory is the Mozambican president who, on that unforgettable day, stood at the door of his plane, dressed in a dark-blue pin-striped suit, his beard, not long then, was punctuated by his amused and cheerful smile — a smile that over the years has characteristically, if anything else, made him very different from any other president past or present.

Cde Machel flashed that charming boyish grin to acknowledge the deafening applause from "Povo Zimbabweano".

In the few moments he stood there gazing at the thousands who had gathered to welcome him, the first thought that came to my mind was that, "he is a very simple kind of man", but at the same time I could not help but feel the power and quiet dignity that radiated from this famed guerilla leader.

As he came off the plane, Cde Machel did something else that became customary on all his trips to Zimbabwe and Cde Mugabe's trips to Mozambique — a

gesture that in its simplicity epitomised the closeness between the two leaders, or should I say "friends and brothers".

Cde Machel's first words in Zimbabwe since that August morning have consistently always been: "Aah Roberto . . . Yah Mugabe . . . and they would hug."

One would think he had been away for just a few days, for, Cde Machel always quickly made himself at home in Zimbabwe.

The Samora I knew also never let things get him down as I learnt on his first state visit to Zimbabwe. On that wonderful day a beaming Cde Machel was to cut a ribbon at a ceremony to mark the opening of Harare's most famous avenue, renamed after him. The over-enthusiastic crowd thronging the avenue pushed for a better look and the ribbon snapped before Cde Machel could cut it.

The Samora I knew wasn't bothered. He performed the ceremony by punching the air with his clenched fist and shouting: "Viva povo Zimbabweano!" . . . and the crowd loved it.

On that day Cde Machel taught me my first few words of Portuguese as his slogans rang: "Viva independence du Zimbabwe . . . Viva Mozambique et Zimbabwe . . . Aluta Continua!"

He had a seriousness in him too, and left a few lessons for Zimbabweans

during that state visit. At a mammoth rally at Rufaro Stadium I remember Cde Machel saying: "I want to make an appeal to you Zimbabweans. Be patient . . . don't demand changes immediately. Let us first go and do some work."

Coming so soon after independence when there was a crisis of expectation, these were indeed words rich in wisdom.

Cde Machel has always demonstrated an affinity with the ordinary people by frequently diverting from the official path of his tour to mingle and chat with the man in the street.

My last memories of the Great Samora Machel are only a few weeks old when he hosted a Frontline States summit in Maputo. He was his usual self, cheerful to all his guests, yet, serious about the problems facing Mozambique and the rest of the Southern African region.

On that day, Cde Machel reiterated to a world that did not believe him that South Africa wanted him dead — only to die a short while later, in South Africa. He died an unfairly horrible death.