

Machel woos the British

Samora Machel's 18 day tour of Europe was full of incident. In Portugal the ebullient Mozambican was mobbed by cheering crowds and in Britain his ready wit thawed the usually staid English businessmen. **Andrew Lycett** analyses the impact Machel's visit has had on the West and what is likely to emerge from his bridge building efforts.

THE BRITISH combination of pomp and incompetence seemed to go down well with the Mozambicans. On the second day of Samora Machel's official visit to London, Earl Jellicoe, Chairman of the British Overseas Trade Board, was attempting to introduce the Mozambican President to a couple of hundred British businessmen in Painter's Hall in the City. He identified Machel and his excellent interpreter, Colonel Fernando Honwana, all right, but when it came to Foreign Minister Joaquim Chissano, the Lord's memory let him down, and he later had to give the floor to Machel admitting he had "got it completely muddled up".

The Mozambican head of state, who is one of the very few Third World leaders actually to have fought a war of independence (as head of Frelimo, the *Frente para Libertacao de Mocambique*, against the Portuguese from 1964 to 1974), was singularly non-plussed. He diplomatically ascribed Jellicoe's *faux pas* to his military training, which meant he had to secure his right flank, where Machel and other Ministers were seated, before turning his attention to the left, where the bemused Chissano was placed.

Then standing up in his smart double breasted suit in front of a full length portrait of the Queen, the President proceeded to engage his distinguished audience in an intelligent and witty dialogue which left even the most stolid merchant banker visibly impressed.

At the bottom, though, the British business community, although on its best behaviour, did not quite know how to react to the Mozambican President's sparkling Latin rhetorical style. There was embarrassed laughter when he presented Mozambique as a "backward country colonised by one of the most backward countries of Europe, which itself was a colony of Great Britain. We are agreed?" (Possibly it was the similarity of circumstances between Britain and down-at-heel Portugal, an earlier stop-over on Machel's 18 day European tour, which made the Mozambicans so at ease in London.)

Then there was stuff about Britain knowing more about Mozambique than the Mozambicans themselves. "When you decided on the border between our country and South Africa you must have known what already existed in the latter. And

when you drew a bulge from what used to be Southern Rhodesia into Mozambique you must have known there was something useful there."

There were indications about the areas for potential British involvement in Mozambique (agriculture, road building, minerals and industry) and discussion about – in the President's words – the audience's "concerns regarding private investment, and these are legitimate concerns".

In a question and answer session, Earl Jellicoe, in another incarnation, Chairman of Tate and Lyle, kicked the ball off with a query about opportunities in the sugar industry. Machel replied that when Jellicoe was last in Maputo in 1980 they had both gone down to the Mozambique/Swaziland frontier where they could see Tate and Lyle sugar estates in the neighbouring country. "I said to you then, 'When are you going to come over the border?' We are still waiting."

The businessmen upped and applauded at the end of it all; Machel clapped them back Chinese-style. Clearly he had succeeded in presenting a valid case for British commercial involvement in his country. But as one of his advisers later remarked, "It will be interesting to see if these City gents now convert their enthusiasm into action."

But then the whole visit of President Machel to six European countries was interesting. Until recently he has been running a tight Marxist ship, applying, as recently as last year, for membership of Comecon, the Eastern bloc's common market. He was refused. For all the Western paranoia about the situation, the

Russians seem remarkably unenthusiastic about establishing a foothold in Southern Africa. Western aid has been much more valuable and useful than Warsaw pact and Cuban assistance.



Machel with British Premier, Thatcher (right). Goodwill and money but no guns

So, encouraged somewhat by Western discoveries of oil, coal and other minerals, the Mozambicans embarked on a tour which Foreign Minister Chissano said they had been planning since 1976.

Last stop on the itinerary was London, and if the contents of the hired van at the back of Claridges hotel, where the party stayed, were anything to go by, London's famous department store, Harrods and a host of other shopkeepers benefited hugely from this perspicacious piece of British Foreign Office planning. Monocled British Ambassador to Maputo, John Stewart (described by the correspondent of one Fleet Street newspaper as "tight lipped") was on hand to tell anyone who cared to listen that President Machel admired Margaret Thatcher's firmness and decisiveness – apropos the British Prime Minister's no-nonsense attitude to Ian Smith over the Lancaster House talks on Zimbabwe.

Margaret Thatcher entertained him to lunch, along with Sir Laurens Van der Post, 'Tiny' Rowland and others. The Queen also extended Machel and his wife Dona Graca an invitation to lunch, investing him at the same time, according to the *Times'* Court and Social page, with the Insignia of a Knight Grand Cross of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George.

Back at Claridges the Mozambican head of state was visited in his suite by Lord Soames, who had been so intimately involved in Zimbabwean independence. The hotel itself was somewhat unusually decked out with the Mozambican flag, which depicts a gun, a hoe and a book as symbols of Frelimo's revolution.

On his last day in Britain, President Machel insisted on driving out to the Military Academy at Sandhurst. He was impressed enough by British training methods to suggest that Mozambican officers may come to Britain for instruction.

However Whitehall was less enthusiastic about his request for arms. (Only Yugoslavia, out of his previous destinations, actually offered weaponry.) Britain did make the delegation's visit worthwhile however by cancelling over £20m worth of debts incurred in the late 1970s and offering additional untied assistance in the way of food aid, health services, training and railway rehabilitation. The only negative note was sounded by Foreign Minister Chissano at an end-of-visit press conference at which he expressed his disappointment at the British Government's equating of the South African raid on Maputo with earlier ANC operations in SA. ■