

# Emotional reaction to Machel proposal

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Graça Machel, former wife of the 1980s Mozambican president, was overcome on hearing the inquiry plan

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BY CHRISTELLE TERREBLANCHE

A new inquiry into the death of Samora Machel, the former Mozambican president, 20 years ago, was mooted in a surprise twist in President Thabo Mbeki's state of the nation address.

In a speech that highlighted reconciliation of past wounds, Mbeki referred twice to the "mysterious plane crash" that led to the "violent death" of Machel and 33 others on South African soil and said that it "still requires a satisfactory explanation".

Machel's widow, Graça Machel, now married to Nelson Mandela, was overcome with emotion on Friday when Mbeki opened his address by welcoming her and raising the mystery still surrounding the crash.

"I am so moved, I can hardly talk," was all the former Mozambican first lady would say.

The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) said it had "noted" Mbeki's remarks "on the matter" of Machel.

"The NPA will consider the president's remarks and take such action as may be necessary," said Makhosini Nkosi, the NPA's spokesperson.

Mbeki announced that the 20th anniversary of the crash would be commemorated. On the night of October 19 1986, at the height of apartheid and cold war tensions in the region, Machel was returning from a crisis summit in Zambia on the liberation of southern Africa, when his plane veered off course and crashed in mountainous terrain, this near Mbuzini, Mpumalanga.

Many questions about and allegations of apartheid state involvement still surround the crash. Machel was returning home to be with Graça on her birthday.

The truth and reconciliation commission recommended in its final report "further

investigation by an appropriate structure" of the crash's many outstanding questions. Mozambique has also formally requested a reopening of the inquest done by judge Cecil Margo in the 1980s. Margo cleared South African authorities of any wrongdoing.

At the time, Mozambican and Russian inquest members withdrew amid allegations of a South African cover-up and concluded that the crash was not an accident.

Dumisa Ntsebeza (SC), the former investigative head of the truth commission, welcomed the possible re-opening, stressing that "there was always a possibility that a false beam was used to lure the plane off course, while there was also a suggestion that people attempted to switch off the Maputo airports' runway lights so that the false beam should be the only guide for landing".

"But this must be thoroughly investigated as the truth commission had neither the time nor wherewithal to do so," Ntsebeza said.

"I will never forget how Graça Machel broke down when we called her to testify about the event that led to her [first] husband's death and how utterly frustrated she was that there has not been movement on that case.

"I think the non-resolution of the case, as the president referred to it, is something that decided her against continuing a political life after spending years as minister of education. At least South Africans owe it to the wife of [Nelson] Mandela to investigate after so many allegations of involvement."

Hpolipo Patricio, Mozambique's ambassador to South Africa, called Mbeki's remarks "a very positive statement" about an issue that his government had tried to get clarity on.

"It is a very emotional issue," said Patricio, who was Machel's deputy home affairs minister at the time of his death.

"We are pleased that with the marking of 20 years of the death of the father of our



**Samora Machel, the former president of Mozambique, in a photograph taken in 1984**

PHOTOGRAPH, MARK PETERS, AP

nation there is renewed commitment not to let the issue rest.

"Mozambique will work with South Africa to try and get the answers."

Shortly after the truth commission's call for a reopening of the Machel plane crash, a team was appointed to re-investigate the matter, but the issue was shelved after an initial probe failed to shed any new light on the case.

Other pressing cases were usurping the NPA's scarce resources.

If the NPA decides to take up Mbeki's suggestion, the matter is likely to be pursued by its priority crimes unit, which was tasked with prosecuting apartheid-era crimes by those who did not come clean before the truth commission. It already has its hands full with 15 investigations and five pending prose-

cutions, as Vusi Pikoli, the NPA head, indicated last month.

In addition, the future of its super investigative unit, the Scorpions, is still in the balance. Against all expectations, Mbeki on Friday failed to reveal the outcome of the Khampepe Commission, which was appointed to investigate whether the unit should be re-incorporated into the police.