

Diplomacy belies Pretoria's role in Mozambique

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In Johannesburg

A FINE irony of diplomacy was being played out between the Pretoria and Maputo governments yesterday as the final steps were taken to secure the release of a white South African family from the clutches of the Mozambique rebel movement, the MNR.

The South African Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, announced that the Muller family, captured by the MNR after their yacht ran aground in April, had been airlifted by helicopter to a South African warship and were on their way home.

His statement disclosed that the family's release resulted from direct negotiations with the MNR, sanctioned by Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano.

The irony of Mr Botha's announcement of course lies in the notion of South Africa obtaining Maputo's permission to talk to a surrogate organisation maintained by Pretoria to destroy the self-same government. Although Pretoria insists that it no longer has anything to do with the rebel movement, there are grounds for considerable scepticism.

The Foreign Minister and his officials have long been opposed to the military adventures indulged in by the South African security establishment. After F. W. de Klerk took the presidency last year, the Department of Foreign Affairs is believed to have proposed legislation making it a criminal offence for South Africans to support non-governmental organisations in neighbouring states. But the proposal has seemingly been abandoned, presumably because of opposition within government circles.

Such legislation would have been ostensibly aimed at private individuals, notably Portuguese-speaking businessmen said to have been supporting the MNR partly out of resentment at the takeover of their assets in Mozambique following the 1974 revolution. But their motivation is believed to have as much to do with profits as grudges — the profits being secured from covert funding by the South African military.

One such businessman is a Mozambique refugee turned tycoon whose ostentatious style of living extends to a Johannes-

burg house with floors made of semi-precious stones. His road to riches was through the Angolan conflict, in which he supplied Unita rebels with the backing of the South African Defence Force (SADF). Today he is known to have substantial business interests in Mozambique. There is no evidence that he has personally been supplying the MNR in the same way as Unita, but it can be assumed that similar conduits have been used by the SADF to promote the Mozambique conflict.

More significant, however than the middle-men in such supply operations are the sources — the clandestine services of the South African military establishment.

There is evidence to suggest that the military units involved are the Special Forces and, in particular, the grotesquely named Civil Co-Operation Bureau (CCB). The CCB is being investigated by the Harms Commission of Inquiry into the hit squad controversy. It has already been established that the unit was responsible for dirty tricks operations — including political murders — inside South Africa. But evidence indicates that it was established primarily to carry out foreign operations in countries including Mozambique.

Mr Justice Harms has been barred from investigating these foreign operations by the terms of reference imposed by the government. It is assumed that the restriction is intended to protect the authorities from embarrassment. Whether such embarrassment could relate to SADF links with the MNR is a matter for speculation, but once again the speculation is encouraged by some evidence.

Last month, a former regional commander of the CCB, Pieter Botes, was quoted by the radical Afrikaans newspaper, *Vrye Weekblad*, as saying that he had personally been involved in a recent deal in which the CCB had bought a substantial quantity of arms in Mozambique. The purchases ranged from pistols and hand-grenades to anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

It is known that a huge illicit arms trade has developed across the Mozambique border, demoralised Frelimo soldiers selling their Eastern bloc weapons to dealers supplying South African customers ranging from gangsters involved in drugs to tribesmen engaged in fratricidal faction-fighting. Supplies are so plentiful that the going rate for an AK47 assault rifle in the Eastern Transvaal now stands at little more than £100. Political murder requiring somewhat lighter weapons, the motivation for the CCB in purchasing anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons is difficult to understand, unless it is in order to re-supply the MNR.

South African cabinet ministers have passionately denied knowledge of the CCB although the unit existed as a formal and integral part of the South African Defence Force with an operational budget of about £7 million. Such implausible denials contribute to the sense of irony when Pretoria asks President Chissano's permission to talk to the MNR in order to rescue the Muller family.