

Arms arrive in Zimbabwe, report

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The report said the Zimbabwean government confirmed that 3-million rounds of assault rifle ammunition, 3 000 mortar rounds and 1 500 rocket-propelled grenades ordered from the Chinese government had arrived in Harare. According to the report South Africa refuelled the Chinese vessel, An Yue Jiang, which was transporting the arsenal.

The South African government denied media reports that it assisted in the delivery of the arms. The Weekender quoted a Mozambican online newspaper, Canal de Moçambique, which reported that the ship had been refuelled by the SAS Drakensberg off the coast of South Africa before sailing north to offload its cargo. It reported that the ship was offloaded at Ponta Negra in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, Zimbabwean government officials said it was offloaded in Angola, according to the report. Canal de Moçambique reported that President Thabo Mbeki gave "a direct instruction" to Deputy Defence Minister Mluleki George to send the SAS Drakensberg to refuel the An Yue Jiang. Presidential spokesman Mukoni Ratshitanga dismissed the reports, saying "it seems that the season of propaganda is upon us". George said he had no instruction from Mbeki to dispatch the SAS Drakensberg and that the allegations had no substance. However, the Canal de Moçambique article also said the arms were flown to Harare in an Ilyushin Il-76 belonging to Avient Aviation, a freight charter airline based in Zimbabwe but registered in the UK. This was confirmed by government officials in Harare, The Weekender said. Zimbabwe's Deputy Information Minister Bright Matonga confirmed the weapons have been delivered. The Angolan government's assistance came after an appeal by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) chairman, Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa, to member states to bar the delivery of the ammunition to Zimbabwe, saying the arms could deepen the country's election crisis. The US and British governments had also exerted concerted pressure on the SADC and China to stop the ship from docking in the region. The ship has been spotted off the coast of Port Elizabeth, The Weekender said.

The Times (SA)/Zimbabwe Guardian