

Don't ditch coup suspects

It is a rivetting tale: suspected soldiers of fortune, a mysterious flight, a coup plot. For anybody who has read the work of Frederick Forsyth, it may seem a copycat version of the *Dogs of War*.

Just that this one gets more bizarre as it unfolds in Harare. It began on Sunday night, when an ageing Boeing 727-L100 landed there. Whether it was by choice or force is unclear, as are its points of take-off, destination and purpose. The Mugabe government claims the 64 passengers on board had confessed to being mercenaries, some from South Africa.

Three days later, in Equatorial Guinea, the government there announced it had arrested 15 men in connection with a coup plot, after being tipped off by South Africa. Pretoria, in its response, has washed its hands of the South Africans, although allegations against them remain uncorroborated. It has also declined to explain why it had failed to stop the alleged coup plotters leaving the country. The government should quit trying to please the tyrants of Africa and accept that it has an obligation to ensure that the rights of its citizens are protected. That obligation extends to insisting, difficult as may seem, that they are treated humanely while in detention and that they are tried fairly.