

The Case Of “Samora Machel”

The Truth Commission Files

[Machel-Report]

Date air crash (with a Tupolev 134A jetliner): sunday night 19/10/1986, shortly after 21.00 hrs

Place: Machel's plane travelling from Lusaka (Zambia), over Zimbabwe and Mozambique to Maputo crashed in South African territory, into a hillside belonging to the Lebombo mountains in the Mbuzini area, the corner of the eastern Transvaal, near the junction of the Mozambican, Swazi and South African borders (see map).

The Tupolev made its fatal turn towards the SA border because it was following signals of a VOR (Very high frequency omnidirectional radio) which was not that of Maputo.(Notes *1)

Victims: President Samora Machel and 33 others died, 10 survived (Notes*2)

Address victims: Maputo (Mozambique); **Sex victims:** Men and Women;

"Race": Blacks and Whites;

Ages: all adults

Position victims: The President, the Transport Minister and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Mozambique (among others)

Information victims: (see Notes*2)

Perpetrator: ?? SA covert forces ??

?? Crime activity:

Facts: The International Commission of Inquiry's technical and factual report was signed by the three members of the International Commission (Mozambique, the Soviet Union and South Africa). The report written by experts is essentially a technical and factual description of the flight of the Presidential aircraft on 19 October 1986. It speaks of the crew, the aircraft instruments, the fuel, the altitude, Maputo airport, air traffic control operations, the air traffic control operator who was on duty on the night, the autopsies carried out on the dead, the site of the crash, the position of the wreckage and so on [AIM:20/1/87]

It concluded, based on the evidence of the 'black box' Cockpit Voice Recorder, recovered from the wreckage, that the crew of the Presidential aircraft, a Soviet built Tupolev 134 made a fatal turn to the right away from its correct flight path, because they were following a radio beacon (a VOR - a very high frequency omnidirectional radio) which was not that of Maputo. They believed that this was the Maputo airport, and the instrument panel of the plane showed that at least one of the navigational dials was set for the correct Maputo frequency. [Aim:17/10/87]

The report states that the pilots were sober and were physically capable of carrying out their duties, that they were of proven competence, and that the weather conditions of the night of 19 October

were not unfavorable. [[AIM:20/1/87]

What VOR this was, and whether it was genuine or a decoy, was never identified.

Two hypotheses:

-1 ?? Planned Air crash; hypothesis that President Samora Machel's Tupolev 134 aircraft was diverted from its correct flight path by outside electronic interference with its navigational instruments. [AIM: 23/10/86]. (Notes*1) Electronic deception could be carried out by a false emitter of beacon which is pre-positioned. Israel has build up considerable experience in electronic deception techniques and once the technique of directing the beam is mastered, the process becomes very simple. Since SA enjoys close military and other relations with Israel, there would be no problem in Pretoria being provided with all the relevant and know-how [Minty, SAPEM Nov.1987]

President Joaquim Chissano said in June 1987 that President Samora's death was no accident. (AIM:17/10/87) No formal accusation has ever been made. There remain many unanswered questions (Notes *3)

-2 ?? Hypothesis that the crash might have been caused by pilot error. The weather was bad (Notes*4), cloud cover was heavy and the aircraft, which would have been alright if it had been on the approach to Maputo was at too low an altitude over the rugged border country where Komatipoort is at 8,000 feet [New African, Dec.1986]

A South African 'Board of Inquiry' under Judge Cecil Margo proclaimed the crash an accident and blamed the Soviet Crew, claiming that the plane had locked on another VOR which they had mistaken for Maputo. [AIM Inf. Bull no.127 Febr.1987]

Result of Air Crash:

-Died several important Mozambican political and intellectual leaders.

-The day after the crash Mozambique and South Africa agreed that an International Commission of Inquiry (ICI) be established with the participation of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and according to ICAO procedures. This would involve Mozambique as owner of the plane, the Soviet Union as its manufacturers, and South Africa as the site of the site of the crash. However the investigation was delayed for some weeks by the SA government's refusal to hand over the flight recorders (the so called black boxes: the digital flight data recorders-DFDR, and the cockpit voice recorder- CVR). The CVR had 'to be played back and compared with the tape recording of the Maputo tower' [AIM Inf. Bull. no.127 Febr.1987 & no.125 Dec.1986]. The factual report states that President Samora Machel's plane was following signals from a VOR (very high frequency omnidirectional radio) which was not that of Maputo. (AIM:21/1/87).

??Crime motives:

??-1. President Samora Machel was 'a major target' of SA [AIM:21/10/86] and accused, 2 weeks before the crash, of renewing support for ANC rebels. Pretoria banned the new migration of Mozambican workers into SA. In the weeks before the crash the SAn government had conducted a prodigious destabilization campaign against Mozambique. On 7 October Defence Minister Gen. Magnus Malan threatened the Mozambican leader personally. The unusually vitriolic tone of SA criticism of Mozambique and of Machel, especially by military spokesmen, gives credence to theories that the SA government got tired of Machel and (...) wanted him gone. [AC 12/11/86]

Mozambique was at a critical moment in the struggle: Renamo had started a huge offensive and

threatened to cut Mozambique in two parts. The SA leadership believed that the Mozambican government was on the verge of collapse [SF Chronicle 21/10/86].

According to former Mozambican Minister Cabaço (Int.KdJ 11/94) there is no sufficient proof that SA murdered President Samora Machel, but personally he believes that they were responsible for his death and well for the following reasons:

1. on the wednesday before the death of Samora Machel, Carlos Cardoso director of AIM agency received a message that the President had died.
2. before leaving for Lusaka Samora Machel organized a meeting with journalists, the party leadership and the military. He told them that he had received information that the SAnS wanted to kill him. He gave clear instructions what to do if he wouldn't come back.
3. SA wanted to get rid of Samora Machel for the following reason:

Under pressure of some presidents of the frontline states, President Banda was forced to expel the Renamo soldiers who used Malawi as a springboard for attacks on Mozambique. Banda complied with the demands of the frontline states' leaders, but allowed Renamo to cross into Tete and Zambezia province. Renamo mounted a huge offensive in Zambezia (where Frelimo had few troops at his disposal), and approached the city of Quilimane, trying to split Mozambique in two parts and to provide Malawi with an outlet to the sea.

The SAnS expected that the death of Samora Machel would cause a powerstruggle in Maputo and that no Mozambican troops would be sent to counter the Renamo offensive, until the leadership crisis would be over.

According to Cabaço, the SA strategy failed: a) there didn't break out any power struggle and Joaquim Chissano was immediately elected to succeed Samora Machel as the new president; and b) a military force was sent to Zambezia province to counter the Renamo offensive on the exact day fixed by Machel and his generals (tuesday 21/10/86).

??-2 No crime, just a genuine accident: the death of Machel, one of the few frontline politicians who was ready to sign a treaty with SA, simply could not be in SAn interest. [AC:12/11/86]: According to "Africa Confidential" Even leaders of the ANC in Lusaka privately worked on the assumption that the crash was not due to SAn action. Suggestions that the SADF used complex electronic methods to confuse the pilot of Machel's plane or make the controls malfunction seem fanciful. It seems an unnecessarily complicated way of bringing down an aircraft. If true, it would risk exposing in public gaze military technology which is not available even to superpowers and which, if it exists, could change the world's military balance.

Chain of command: If no accident, it was planned on a very high level (certainly Malan etcetera)

Witnesses: 1. The only surviving member of the Soviet crew Vladimir Novosselov [Komsomolskaya Pravda 19/11/86] said in an interview: "I am convinced that it was not an accident, but a case of foul play. The Soviet crew of the presidential plane was highly experienced. The pilot, Yuri Novodran, had been flying for 25 years. The other crew members- co-pilot Igor Kartamichev, navigator Andrei Kudriachov and radio operator Anatoli Choulipov - were also very experienced." "At about six o'clock in the evening, the President came to Lusaka (...). The plane gained the necessary height and headed towards Maputo. When we were flying over Zambia the altimeter showed 11,400 meters. When we crossed the Mozambican frontier the Tupolev descended to 10,600 meters. Novodran ordered contact to be made with Maputo airport requesting authorization to land. The airport services granted the request. Weather conditions were favorable for the flight.

Maputo was ahead and to the left of the left of the pilots. To the right and very close was the Mozambique-South African border. We were gradually descending. The altitude was 5,200 meters. Then we dropped to 3,000 meters. We were 113 kilometers away from Maputo. Novodran switched off the autopilot and took over the manual controls. He was an excellent pilot. Even navigator Kudriachov and radio operator Choulipov, who have spent around 14,000 hours in the air, did not know a more experienced captain than Novodran. We descended to less than a thousand meters. The last thing I remember was that the altimeter was reading 970 meters, after that nothing." [AIM Information Bulletin no.125 Dec. 1986]

2. Machel's bodyguard Fernando Maniel João, the survivor with the least serious injuries, searched for help. At midnight he managed to contact the Komatipoort police from the phone of a missionpost. He asked them to contact Mozambique about the crash, but in fact the Mozambican government was only officially informed of the disaster by the SA authorities at 6.50 on the Monday morning. Another survivor Almeida Pedro said that the SA police appeared on the scene of the crash at about 2.00 in the morning of Monday 20 October (four and a half hrs after the crash). The police "didn't go to the aid of the people who were crying out. There were people who died for lack of assistance" and Mr. Pedro said he saw "all of them collecting papers, diplomatic bags, dollars. They took lots of things." (Notes*5) This was confirmed by Mr. João: "the South Africans were not at all concerned with the lives of the wounded. They were just messing around with the other things there". He said he became angry with the South Africans for "refusing to take the wounded to hospital". He spoke with a police inspector who finally ordered helicopters and medical staff to come and take the injured to the hospital in Nelspruit. The first of the injured arrived at Nelspruit at 8.00 am, almost 11 hours after the crash. [AIM-27/10/86]

3. According to the "Mozambican Medical Commission" persons currently unknown interfered with bodies of six of the 35 who died when the aircraft smashed. Six of the bodies were found to have incisions, already stitched up, on the sides of the neck. The incisions, about seven centimetres long, were made with a sharp instrument on one or other side of the neck along the line of the cleido mastoideo muscle. The bodies affected were those of a Soviet crew member, President Samora's two Cuban doctors, two Mozambican stewardesses and of a functionary of the Mozambican Foreign Ministry. (...) It was not possible to establish the precise time at which the incisions had been made, but the interference with the bodies took place either at the site of the crash, or on the journey between Mbuzini and Komatipoort. (...) These cuts were not the cause of death. The SA Prof. Nel advanced the theory that the cuts had been made to collect blood samples, but declared also that it was not normal procedure. [AIM 25/1/87]

Question: Why this interference with the crash victim's bodies and by whom?

Notes:

*1 Transcribing the CVR, one key fact became evidentnamely that the Tupolev made its fatal turn towards the SA border because the VOR (Very high frequency Omnidirectional Radio) signal it was following was not the VOR from Maputo airport.[AIM, Inf.Bull. no.127 Febr.1987]

According to the CVR transcription, at 21.11 and 28 seconds the captain said "making some turns. Couldn't it be straight?" The navigator replied "VOR indicates that way", signifying that he believed the plane was following the VOR signal transmitted from Maputo airport.

In fact, the plane had just made a fatal turn of 37 degrees to the south-west. The turn began over the zone between Magude, a town about 100 kilometers north-west of Maputo, and the South African border. It meant that the plane was now flying away from Maputo, and not towards the city as the crew thought. Until Magude, the plane was flying with a deviation of only four to six kilometers from its established flight path. This is perfectly normal and means that in navigational

terms, the plane was on course.

At the Margo hearing (a hearing of the SAnS themselves, under the chairmanship of Judge Cecil Margo at the Rand Supreme court in Johannesburg from 20 to 28 January 1987), the SAnS tried hard to argue that the plane had locked on the VOR at Matsapa airport, near Manzini in Swaziland and the only legitimate VOR which could conceivably have been mistaken for Maputo. But the Matsapa and Maputo VORs operate on quite distinct frequencies, and one of the VOR dials among the instruments of the wrecked plane showed, according the SA Bureau of Standards, cited in the factual report, the correct frequency for Maputo- namely 112.7 Mhz. The crew had also flown in and out of Maputo dozens of times, making over 70 per cent of their landings by night. They were thus well-acquainted with the frequency of the Maputo VOR, and very unlikely to switch to another VOR by mistake. Certain technical details also rule out Matsapa. A projection of the plane's flight path into Swazi airspace passes 35 kilometers to the east of Matsapa. When a plane follows a VOR signal, it should eventually pass directly above the VOR. The SAn investigators stressed radial 045 of the Matsapa VOR. VORs transmit through 360 degrees, and each radial has a coded identification. The 045 radial is one of the approach paths to Matsapa airport. But this radial would have cut into the aircraft's original flight path several kilometers to the northwest of where the turn actually occurred. So the Tupolov cannot have turned in accordance with the dictates of that radial of the Matsapa VOR. All evidence in fact points away from Matsapa and towards the only other hypothesis - that the plane was lured from its route by a powerful decoy VOR, transmitting on the same frequency as the Maputo VOR.

*2 Referring to list of names from the people deceived, not published on this site.

*3 Although the Tupolev entered a military and operational zone (a "special restricted airspace") which was under 24 hour radar surveillance by a very sophisticated defense system (the Plessey AR-3D computerized radar system, integrated into the air control and command system by 1982) no warning was given that the plane was off-course and entering SAn air space. Neither that the mountains presented a threat to the aircraft. No preventive action was taken, although according to the Jo'burg paper 'Business Day' of 21/10/86, quoting a SA government source, the Mozambican President's plane had been tracked on SA radar for hundreds of kilometers, even while it was over Zimbabwe. Yet no warning was given. [AIM 18-25/11/86]

Question: Why didn't the SA air control warn the pilot of President Samora's Tupolev 134 that he was off course and in danger of entering SA air space?

-During this period there was a major military build-up in the eastern Transvaal, including the despatch to Komatipoort of Reconnaissance Commandos, the favored instrument of long-range incursions. On the day of the crash, there was already a full military alert in north and east Transvaal and the South African authorities admit that their radar tracked Machel's aircraft. [AC:12/11/86]. SA troops were suspicious slow to arrive. Question: where were the South African troops?

-The factual report of the International Commission of Inquiry read out at the SA hearing states that during the on-site investigation an abandoned campsite was found on the SA side of the border approximately 150 meters southeast of the place where the aircraft initially contacted the ground. Witnesses on Mozambique-side of the border informed that a tent on the site had been removed on the day after the accident. "The company commander of the army unit in the Komatipoort area has no knowledge of any camps with large tents in the particular area." [AIM:22/1/87].

Question: What was this mysterious campsite near the place of the crash?

-South African behavior in the immediate aftermath of the crash was also suspicious: The police

was there first (02.00 hrs. on 20 October), then medical help by 06.00 hrs, 4 hours or more after the arrival of SAn police on the scene. The Pretoria authorities waited for 9 hours (until 06.50 hrs. the following morning to get the word to Maputo. Even then, the Mozambicans were told that the crash had taken place in Natal, some 200 kilometers away from the actual site in the Transvaal.

Eyewitnesses claim that the police checked with those still able to talk that the wreck was the presidential plane, and then ignored the injured and immediately set about collecting documents.

Question: The SA knew whose plane it was, they knew exactly where and when it crashed -yet they didn't inform the Mozambican authorities until nine hours after it had happened. Why?

Question: Why, when the police arrived on the scene, did they busy themselves with the documents scattered among the wreckage rather than with helping the wounded?

- A flow of disinformation then began:the Soviet flight engineer, who had been at the rear of the aircraft, was described as the pilot(...) Then reports were circulated (Pik Botha 1/11/86) that there were minute quantities of alcohol in the blood of the navigator and radio reporter, suggesting that, the vodka-loving Soviet pilots had been drunk on duty. Such quantities are however produced naturally in decomposition. SA Foreign Minister Pik Botha spoke also of the aircraft as "dated and obsolete", claiming it was not equipped "with an automatic ground proximity warning system to warn pilots should they descend below a certain altitude." A claim categorically rejected. The presidential aircraft, a Tupolev 134 was manufactured in 1980. It carried 'electronic equipment of the current generation, using integrated circuits, and with a design improved and updated for this technology'.[AIM:2/11/86]

Botha commented that the Mozambican authorities had launched their search for the missing aircraft out to sea. In fact, it was conducted both on land and at sea; such searches are normally made over a large area both to the left and right of the presumed flight path [AIM:2/11/86] Later Pik Botha admitted that he had made some false statements "to alleviate and minimize the very dangerous effect of the allegations being made against our air force, the SA government and unnamed SA agents" (AIM:27/1/87]

Question: If the Pretoria regime is really innocent of the plane crash, what need did it have to launch a lot of disinformation.

*4 The director of Mozambique's meteorological department, Sérgio Ferreira, said that the weather over southern Mozambique was good on the day of Samora Machel's plane crash in South African territory. Mr. Ferreira showed satellite photographs in sequence from 06.00 GMT to 12.000 GMT on that day. There was a slight increase in cloud cover, but visibility remained good. [AIM 27/10/86]

*5: Some days later Min. Pik Botha held a press conference at which he exhibited a document, allegedly taken from the Tupolov, which he claimed referred to a Mozambican/Zimbabwean plot to overthrow the Malawian government of Life President Kamuzu Banda [AIM: 23/1/87]

Amsterdam August 1996

Postscript 1997:

Some new articles concerning the death of Samora Machel:

- Shapshak, David: "Re-open Machel death inquiry, says Pik"; Mail&Guardian, 25/10/96;

- "Independent on line"/The Star: "Mandela promises to seek precise truth' on Machel crash";

18/10/96;

- SAPA-AFP:"Mozambique President's plan crash no mystery: expert"; Wellington 22/10/96 [Machel-Expert] (no new information)

- Beresford, David: "SA stole documents"; Mail&Guardian 25/10/96 (no new information)

- Beresford, David: "The mystery remains"; Mail&Guardian, 25/10/96: New information about the possibility of a "decoy"radio becacon which interfered with the legitimate beacon at Maputo and lured the aircraft into wrong trajectory: (...)the decoy beacon would have needed about twice the power of the Maputo transmitter and -requiring a three to-ton lorry to carry the equipment, which would have included an antenna 15ft high and 15ft wide - would probably have been seen on the ground, Another aircraft which was in the air at the time was not similarly affected, And the competing transmitters would have sent the plane om a curved, rather than straight path.

Sources:

- AIM: Samora why he died;Stockholm: Mozambique News Agency/Maputo, 1986.

- Mozambique Information News Review, No. 88 Special Issue, 24 October 1986 [AIM:..] & No.97 Special Issue 28 Jan.1987

- AIM Information Bulletin, No. 124 Nov. 1981; No. 125 Dec. 1986; No. 126 Jan. 1987 [AIMIB:..]

- Africa Confidential, Vol.27 no.23 12/11/86 [AC:..]

- Abdul S. Minty:"Samora Machel's Crash: A Deliberate Aviation Disaster?" in Southern Africa Political & Economic Monthly (SAPEM), Nov. 1987 no.2 pp.10-11 [SAPEM:..]

- Facts and Reports, 16th vol.no.U & V. "Machel Killed in Plane Crash" (U1) & "Samora Machel's last flight"(V81). [F&R:..]

- Interview with ex-Minister Cabaço by Klaas de Jonge (tape nov.1994) [Int. KdJ]

- Cardoso, Carlos: "Disse a Samora que ele ia morrer"; Expresso 5/8/95

- Mulanga, Benedito: "Ainda a morte de Samora Machel"; Jornal de Noticias 14/10/95

- Lucas, Ana Glória; "Os mistérios de uma morte"; Diário de Notícias, 30/11/95

The (secret) Truth Commission Files