

Machel inquiry told of vanishing papers

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JOHANNESBURG.

A CHECKLIST found at the scene of the Machel plane crash mysteriously disappeared from where it was hidden by a South African investigator.

Mr Pieter de Klerk, a chief investigator with the Directorate of Civil Aviation for the South African Department of Transport, revealed this to the Machel inquiry sitting in the Rand Supreme Court on Wednesday.

He and his team arrived at Komatipoort on October 20, the day after the crash. Delegates from the Soviet Union arrived on October 24.

He said they were prevented from carrying out their normal duties on the first day because "the police were still removing

bodies from the site".

The South Africans completed the first stage of investigation "doing observations and taking records, but nothing was disturbed until the other delegations arrived", Mr de Klerk said.

"We then started the investigation together."

The same day a checklist, among other documents was found and "was hidden under a table in our tent. It disappeared during the day".

Mr de Klerk did not say why it was necessary to hide the document or what it contained.

Referring to a report by an employee of the SA Bureau of Standards that instruments handed to the SABS had been fiddled with, Mr de Klerk said:

"There was nothing sinister about the SABS findings.

"We know that the readings definitely changed on impact," Mr de Klerk said, but he added "there could have been human interference afterwards."

The investigator showed the crowded courtroom a horrific video of the wreckage and mutilated bodies, including that of President Samora Machel.

Members of the public could stand no more than a few minutes of the close-up shots before having to walk out of the court.

President Samora Machel died instantly, pathologist Prof. Louis Nel said at the inquiry yesterday.

"From the injuries sus-

tained there is no way he could have survived the accident," Prof. Nel said.

"Most of the skull and brain were absent. Also the heart was not present due to the violence of the accident."

Prof. Nel said President Machel was identified by a ring inscribed with his wife's name, Graca, and by his teeth.

The former head of air traffic control at London's Heathrow Airport, Mr Michael Perry, said although the Maputo air traffic controller had "grave difficulty in comprehending the English language", his performance during the incident "remained at a very good standard of phraseology".

"The standard of communication was very good until 7.18 pm (about

two minutes before the crash)" when the pilot used non-standard terminology and the controller became confused.

Mr Roy Downes, an accident investigator, said there was insufficient fuel on the plane to complete the alternative route to Beira.

It was an "emphatic stipulation of the flight manual that at least two members of the crew had to identify the tuning of navigational aids when they were needed.

"On this flight they did not," he said.

He said there was "pandemonium" in the cockpit during the last few minutes of the flight, with the crew not paying attention to commands from the captain.

Then when the captain saw "no Maputo" he convinced the crew this was because there was a power failure in the city.

A "nefarious person" could have steered the plane off course with a false VOR beacon, but it could not force it to land. More than one beacon or aid was used to land a plane, said Mr Downes.

Several Mozambican witnesses said in statements submitted to Mr de Klerk they were concerned about a military campsite in the area.

The campsite was 150 m south of where the accident occurred. "I gather we are going to hear evidence collected by the Mozambican team," Sir Edward Eveleigh said.—Ziana-Sapa.