

The three riddles of the crash

By JO-ANN BEKKER

AFTER the first week of the official South African inquiry into the Mozambique plane crash near Komatipoort last October, there seem to be as many questions as there are answers.

In particular, no simple answer has emerged to the question: Who or what killed President Samora Machel?

The evidence led so far has uncovered several mysteries:

● Why did the President's jet suddenly veer off-course ten minutes before it was due to land?

● What happened at a strange campsite 150 metres south-east of the crash site, where a tent was removed the day after the crash? Members of the SADF had been seen at the site in the past, according to a report.

● What happened to a checklist compiled by South Africa's chief investigator at the crash site?

One of the most significant unanswered questions is why Machel's Soviet-built Tupolev jet made a 37-degree turn to the right just before it was due to land in Maputo.

This change of direction triggered

the sequence of events which resulted in the plane plunging into hilly country 50 kilometres west of its destination.

Initial evidence placed before the court was highly critical of the safety aspects of the presidential flight on October 19 last year. South African experts claimed:

● The Tupolev TU-134A-3 was carrying insufficient fuel to divert — in the event of an emergency — to the nearest night-airstrip in Beira.

● There was no record of any flight plan being filed.

● The crew failed to act on a ground proximity alarm which sounded shortly before the crash.

● There was confusion between the crew and control at Maputo airport — the airport cleared the plane to land while the crew protested there were no runway lights. The confusion could have resulted partly from an inadequate command of English on the part of the controller and partly from the Tupolev radio operator's

failure to use standard aviation terms.

While such explanations seem to indicate the flight-crew culpable, other information before the commission suggests the accident was influenced by forces beyond the crew's control.

A case in point is the Tupolev's last-minute turn to the right. According to the navigator's explanation on the cockpit voice recorder, it was precipitated by the VOR (VHF Omni Range) reading off a navigational beacon on the ground.

The recording showed the captain, at first alarmed by the change of course, was reassured by the navigator's assurance that: "VOR indicates that way."

The mystery is further compounded by reports that Maputo's beacon had not been coding correctly that night and thus could not have accounted for the VOR reading.

The factual report's reference to an abandoned campsite on the South African side of the border about 150 metres south-east of the crash site, also appears to fuel conspiracy

theories about the cause of the crash.

"Witnesses on Mozambique's side of the border said a tent on the site had been removed the day after the accident," the report states.

"The SA Police Security Branch at Komatipoort was asked to investigate the matter ... (and) found an employee of the Department of Veterinary Services who was patrolling the particular section of the border fence during September and October 1986. He frequently saw members of the SADF camping at the place. Their tents were, however, small.

"The company commander of the army unit in the Komatipoort area (also) has no knowledge of any camps with large tents in the particular area."

Another strange development involved the disappearance of a checklist discovered at the scene of the crash. South Africa's chief investigator into the crash, Pieter de Klerk of the Department of Transport, said he had hidden the list under a table in his tent but it had vanished from the spot the same day.