

WEEKLY MAIL

VOLUME 3, Number 3. FRIDAY JANUARY 23 to THURSDAY JANUARY 29, 1987

THE PAPER FOR A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA

Machel witness rejects 'decoy' beacon theory

By JO-ANN BEKKER

STARTLING information before the Margo inquiry yesterday lifted the lid on South Africa's explanation of why President Samora Machel's plane veered off course: the jet had mistaken a Swaziland navigational beacon for one in Maputo.

The theory also sought to dispel the popular conspiracy theory that a portable beacon had lured the presidential plane into the Eastern Transvaal hillside where it crashed, killing 34 of its 44 passengers.

Roy Downes, a pilot and Department of Transport employee, who said he had tested his theories in a Boeing 737 simulator, claimed Machel's flight crew had confused a reading from a beacon in Matsapa, Swaziland, for the Maputo beacon. On the basis of the reading, they made the fatal 37-degree turn to the right.

Downes said the plane's VOR receiver — which picks up horizontal bearings — had been found to be locked into the Swaziland beacon. The navigator had fed a bearing from this beacon into the auto-pilot on the assumption that it was a beacon at Maputo.

Asked whether a portable beacon could have precipitated the crash, Downes speculated it could have caused the plane to change direction, but — unless there was a corresponding vertical guide — not to descend.

Members of the board of inquiry seemed to attach little weight to the decoy theory. Former British Lord Justice of Appeal, Sir Edward Eveleigh, noted that had there been a malevolent plot against Machel, the "false beacon would be a pretty poor effort if it was intended to lead the aircraft to disaster".

However, one question Downes could not answer was why the distance-measuring equipment and one instrument landing system were both on the same frequency when no transmitter in the area broadcasted on that frequency.

While previous witnesses had hinted at the flight crew's negligence, Downes went further calling them "very ill-disciplined" and complacent.

Contrary to the crew's comments recorded on the cockpit voice recorder, Downes said indications were that many of instruments were in fact working.

He ascribed the total pandemonium in the cockpit during the last three minutes of the crash to "attention fixation" — a common condition in air accidents, whereby the crew latch onto the escape route which seems most accessible. The Tupolev crew, who thought they were flying over the Mozambique coastline, concentrated solely on flying through the clouds to see the lights of Maputo.

Downes, quoting from the cockpit voice recorder, said for a moment it appeared the captain's training had resurfaced, when he said — one minute to impact — "So, no, surely it is indeed cloudy to descend."

"But his desire to see the lights is overwhelming," Downes remarked. "And he continues to descend."