

Critical questions remain about Machel air crash

THE inquiry into the Machel air crash, which ended its hearings in Johannesburg on Monday, leaves the world with a far from satisfactory explanation for the death of a president.

The major flaw in the inquiry cannot be blamed on the commission, or on the South African authorities who — while obviously determined that their explanation for the crash should prevail — have shown an almost pathetic anxiety to reassure observers that the investigation had been conducted with the highest degree of probity.

If there is blame, it should perhaps be laid on the Soviet Union and Mozambique for their failure to take advantage of their right of representation — as well as for preventing the appearance of apparently key witnesses — at hearings properly constituted under international law.

It could, of course, be said that President Machel died on October 19 last year, because — in the somewhat ghastly evidence of the pathologist, Professor Jurie Potgeiter — he had lost his brains, and his heart and lungs had "erupted" from him.

On the basis of the "last, lost opportunity" — previously the principle for apportioning blame under South African civil law — it could be argued that the Russian crew killed President Machel in that, 37 seconds before impact, the ground proximity alarm began wailing and they did nothing about it, thereby failing to take the last opportunity available to avoid the accident.

And it was on this "last, lost" opportunity — and a progression of apparent crew blunders leading up

to it, during the final descent — that the inquiry has tended to concentrate. As the senior air force investigator, Colonel Desmond Lynch, put it at one stage of the hearings: "My lord, this fatal turn, as it is termed, took place at 17,000 feet: it is, in fact, a fatal descent which in my opinion caused the accident." The remark was not challenged.

But — important though such crew errors are — it is that "fatal turn" which concerns the international community, because it is there that the mystery lies of the death of President Machel. And it is in this aspect of the inquiry that the representation of the Russians and Mozambicans was so sadly missed, as a re-examination of the evidence on the South African hypothesis for the turn would show.

The hypothesis can be summed up as follows. The plane was flying with the help of a navigational ground beacon at Maputo. At a critical stage, say the South African experts, the co-pilot may have switched to an alternate beacon in Swaziland. At that precise moment the navigator may have fed a bearing into the navigation system on the assumption that it was locked into the Maputo beacon.

Because they were, in fact, locked into Swaziland, rather than Maputo, the bearing caused them to turn right instead of left. The co-pilot then — the experts theorise — switched back to the Maputo beacon (this has to be assumed, because the instrument was found, after the crash, to have been tuned into Maputo).

It is the nature of such a hypothesis that it can be destroyed by a single flaw. And there are

aspects of evidence which might have provided fruitful ground for challenge to this one, with the sort of rigorous cross-examination which might have been expected from Soviet, or Mozambican lawyers — backed up by expert advisers.

For example, the investigators know that the fatal turn was based on a radio beacon reading, because the cockpit voice recorder has the captain questioning the turn and the navigator replying: "... VOR indicates that way" ("VOR" being the type of beacon). But it is difficult to understand why the co-

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pilot — in control of the aircraft at that stage — did not pick up the exchange and make the point that he had been tuned into the Swazi beacon. This might be explained by inattention on the co-pilot's part (there is evidence that he may have been listening to a Russian broadcasting station with half an ear at the time). But there is a further objection.

It can be assumed that the co-pilot's (supposed) cross-check on the Swazi beacon would have been swift. But there is a course indicator dial in front of the navigator. At the moment the co-pilot switched back to Maputo (after the turn), the needle on the navigator's dial would have swung to the left, warning him he was off course. But in the 10 minutes between the turn and impact, the navigator — if South African theory is to be accepted — failed to act.

Mr Roy Downes, the former pilot in South African government em-

ploy who outlined the theory to the commission, suggested that the navigator might have seen this swing on his dial, when he (the navigator) later made a cryptic comment: "There is something I don't understand, ahh..." But even that comment was made a full four minutes before the crash. And it is extremely difficult to understand why — at a time when there was total confusion among the crew as to where they were — the man responsible for establishing their position failed, for four minutes, to either act, or to point out to his colleagues that the instrument was telling them they were way off course.

It must be added that the only alternative hypothesis for the fatal turn offered up (by remote allegation) from Mozambique — that of a decoy beacon — has been substantially discredited, if only because it has been vaguely detailed.

There is another question of relevance to the inquiry which went largely unexplored, relating to the actions of the South African police in the immediate aftermath of the crash.

On October 27, the Mozambique news agency, AIM, carried an interview with a survivor (again who did not appear as a witness) who complained that police who first arrived on the scene concentrated on collecting and taking away documents, including two diplomatic bags.

In evidence to the inquiry, a senior official in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr Neil Van Heerden, said that when he arrived on the scene, "Things were strewn all over and appeared to be in the original positions in which they landed at the crash."

Subsequently — as Mr Van Heerden related it — a strong wind blew up. A Mozambique Cabinet Minister at the scene, Colonel Sergio Viera, had said the scattered documents appeared to be Machel's personal papers and state documents and had asked the South African Foreign Minister, Mr Pik Botha, if they (the Mozambicans) could remove them before they blew away. Mr Botha, after consultation with the South African Commissioner of Police, had agreed.

Mr Van Heerden went on to say that the commissioner of police had added "that these documents had been photocopied for the purpose of the further investigation and therefore the original documents could be handed back".

The point was not explored any further by counsel, but again almost certainly would have been if Mozambique or the Soviet Union had been represented. But it has been suggested, outside the inquiry, that police — as soon as they realised the significance of some of the documents (they were later used by the South African Government to disclose Mozambique discussions of a possible military attack on Malawi) — bundled them into a vehicle, drove hell for leather to the town of Komatipoort, photocopied them, and then brought them back to the crash site.

The implication could be that they were then redistributed on the ground by the police, which would suggest a conspiracy to mislead. And if that were established, there would be grounds for questioning whether there was any other tampering with the wreckage.