

MOZAMBIQUE

MACHEL CRASH WHITEWASHED

By PAUL FAUVET
Special to the Guardian

MAPUTO—The South African board of inquiry into the plane crash in which Mozambican President Samora Machel died last October finally unveiled its report at a Johannesburg press conference July 9.

It was something of an anticlimax, since there was nothing in the report that had not already been said at the public hearings under Judge Cecil Margo back in January. Predictably, Margo and his fellow board members blamed the Soviet flight crew for the disaster, and ignored or downplayed any evidence pointing to the South African military as the real culprits.

The Mozambican government promptly rejected Margo's conclusion that the crash resulted from pilot error and for the first time publicly declared its belief that the event was an act of murder.

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Margo made much of Pretoria's claim that Mozambique and the Soviet Union had been invited to take part in the inquiry. This is not strictly true. Mozambique and the USSR were invited only to cross-examine witnesses at the public hearings; they were specifically not invited to contribute to the analysis of the evidence and the final conclusions of the inquiry.

They had, in short, been allotted walk-on parts in Judge Margo's script and refused to play them. Mozambique insisted that the tripartite factual commission consisting of Mozambican, Soviet and South African aviation experts should continue its work in order to determine the exact nature of the radio signal the doomed presidential plane had been following. The South Africans refused this demand.

That refusal in itself suggests that Pretoria had something to hide. After all, if the South Africans were so convinced that there had been no foul play, they had nothing to lose by agreeing to the Mozambican request.

Margo had to find some explanation for the radio signal that duped the crew into steering the plane away from its intended destination at Maputo Airport. It was clear from the tran-



Wreckage of Machel's plane: Pilot error or sabotage?

script of the cockpit voice recording that the plane was following a VOR (Very High Frequency Omnidirectional Radio) beacon, and equally clear that this was not the Maputo Airport beacon. Margo's hypothesis is that the Soviet navigator tuned in to the beacon at Matsapa Airport in Swaziland by mistake. This is the only straw for him to clutch at, since Matsapa is the only other legitimate VOR in the vicinity. But when the instrument panel of the wrecked plane was investigated, one of the VOR dials was correctly tuned in to the Maputo frequency, and nothing indicated the Matsapa frequency.

Mozambican aviation experts who have studied the Matsapa VOR say that the Margo thesis is impossible on technical grounds—the plane's route simply cannot be reconciled with

the Matsapa beacon. There is also the common-sense consideration that a highly experienced Soviet navigator who had flown in and out of Maputo dozens of times was most unlikely to flip a switch casually to the wrong frequency.

If the VOR wasn't emanating from Matsapa, then it had to be a fake beacon, a decoy set up for the specific purpose of luring the plane to its doom. This is not an enormously difficult feat—all that is needed to power a mobile decoy VOR are a couple of fully charged vehicle batteries. They will provide enough power for four hours at 50 watts—and the decoy was only required to send its lethal signal for 10 minutes to do its job.

Many other questions remain unanswered in the Margo report. Why, for example, did it

take the South Africans over nine hours to communicate the fact of the crash to Maputo? The plane came down at 9:20 on the night of Oct. 19, in a top-security military exclusion zone near the border, where South African troops were already on full alert (an African National Congress land mine had exploded nearby just two weeks earlier). Yet the first message to Maputo was only sent at 6:50 the following morning.

This delay is perhaps connected with South African police behavior at the crash site. According to the survivors, the police paid no attention to the injured, but rather ransacked the wreckage for documents and money. The wounded were not taken to the hospital until 11 hours after the disaster.

THE MISSING RADAR

The question of South African radar is also missing from the report. By their own admission the South Africans were tracking the plane on their radar screens while it was still over Zimbabwe. The apartheid regime possesses the most sophisticated radar system in Africa which can monitor flight movements all over the subcontinent. Certainly they knew that this was the presidential flight (there was nothing secret about it). Yet when the plane deviated wildly from its course and headed straight for South African territory, no attempt was made to warn the pilot.

Mozambique has meanwhile concluded that the crash was deliberately engineered. In a June 16 speech in the northern town of Mueda, President Joaquim Chissano abandoned the previous official position that the disaster was "unexplained." Instead he declared, "Our enemies, who are colonialism, still colonialism; our enemies, who are racism, still racism; decided to resort once more to violence and murdered our president Samora Machel." Machel, he said, had become "a dangerous man for the enemy" because "he was one of the principal mobilizers of forces throughout the world against racism."

Chissano did not refer specifically to the South Africans; he merely blamed "our enemies." But there was little doubt in anyone's mind as to whom he meant.