

Samora crash probe finds no foul play

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No new evidence that showed foul play has been uncovered in the Scorpions' investigation into the plane crash that killed Mozambican president Samora Machel in 1986.

Director of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) Advocate Anton Ackerman said that despite 60 witnesses consulted beyond those who testified to the Margo Commission of Inquiry into the crash, they have not identified the people who could be responsible in a murder plot.

"We have therefore decided to cease the active investigation led by Dr Torie Pretorius," Ackerman said.

"But the file on Machel's death will not be closed and any new leads will be followed up."

This means that for the time being, a new formal inquiry or prosecutions are not envisaged, despite progress made by Pretorius.

Machel and 19 others died on the night of October 19, 1986, when their plane crashed in mountainous terrain at Mbuzini near Komatipoort on their way home from Zambia after a crisis summit. Only nine people survived the crash, including the Soviet navigator, who was later clandestinely paid out by the apartheid government.

Judge Cecil Margo found that the crash was caused by pilot error, but a separate report by the former Soviet Republic, where the plane was built, and the Mozambican government alleged that he did not properly scrutinise evidence that a false decoy beacon may have caused the Tupolev plane to stray off-course.

Pretorius's investigation during the last year focussed on the false beacon theory, but despite cooperation by the Civil Aviation Authority and Mozambican counterparts, failed to find the proverbial "smoking gun".

It is understood that the National Director of Public Prosecutions Bulelani Ngcuka has informed Machel's widow, Graça Machel, who still believes strongly that the crash on her birthday was foul play.

Graça, now married to former president Nelson Mandela, testified in a closed hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1998, aimed at establishing whether the case should be reopened as an apartheid-related atrocity.

The TRC special investigation into the matter did not find conclusive evidence to support either of the previous findings.

In its final report, the commission recommend that "circumstantial evidence collected did, however, question the conclusions reached by the Margo Commission".

"The investigations conducted (by Margo) raised a number of questions, including the possibility of a false beacon and the absence of a warning from the South African authorities," the report stated and recommended "further investigation by an appropriate structure".

The Mandela government also received a formal request from Mozambique in 1997 to further investigate the possibility of a false beacon used by apartheid operatives.

Some leads established by the TRC were followed up by the Scorpions.