

Samora Machel's memory lives on

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OCTOBER, which has been officially declared Samora Machel month in Mozambique, culminates with activities to mark the 17th anniversary of the death on South African soil of the country's revolutionary hero and president.

Also, the festivities symbolically celebrated Machel's 70th birthday. He was born in August 1933.

Cultural programmes have been drawn up with Mozambicans across the country participating in memory of their fallen first post-liberation president.

Machel and 33 other dignitaries died when a Soviet-made Tupolev 134A jetliner they were travelling in crashed in Komatipoort, Mpumalanga (then Eastern Transvaal) shortly after 9pm on Sunday October 19 1986.

The Tupolev made its fatal turn towards the SA border while it was following signals of a VOR (Very high frequency omnidirectional radio) which, as it turned out, did not belong to Mozambique. Only 10 passengers survived the crash and Mozambique lost its transport and deputy foreign ministers along with its president.

From the onset Mozambican authorities and media suspected that South African covert forces were involved in the crash.

Subsequently an international commission of inquiry's technical and factual report was signed by the three members of the ICI (international commission of inquiry) from Mozambique, the then Soviet Union and South Africa.

The report was essentially a technical and factual description of the flight of the presidential aircraft. The ICI concluded, based on the evidence of the "black box" (cockpit voice recorder), that the

crew made a fatal turn to the right, away from its correct flight path, because they were following a radio beacon which did not originate in Maputo.

The pilots believed they were nearing the Maputo airport, and the instrument panel of the plane showed that at least one of the navigational dials was set for the correct Maputo frequency.

The report stated that the pilots were sober and physically capable of carrying out their duties, that they were of proven competence, and that the weather conditions were favourable.

Meanwhile, talking to Salvador Matendeudzane Mondlane, in a tiny restaurant in downtown Johannesburg, he pauses and reflects longingly on his erstwhile proud life as a chef and waiter in Mozambique's corridors of power.

Mondlane says he served Portuguese colonial rulers and later the Frelimo politicians.

Today the 71-year-old is not serving anyone any longer. Mondlane lives with his wife in a one-bedroom flat in the region's richest city.

Passing time during the day at a downtown restaurant patronised mostly by Mozambican expatriates, survival for Mondlane is a day-to-day business. His wife is employed as a dressmaker.

Mondlane describes Machel as a hero who was an inspiration to all Mozambicans during the difficult post-revolution period that was exacerbated by a civil war.

"He struggled with us and for us during those hard times. He was a man of few words, a soldier who walked and ate like a soldier.

"President Machel was not fussy about his food. He ate like the rest of us whether it was porridge and vegetables or meat. He never had any specific requirements. But he relished nkakana (dried, bitter wild spinach cooked with peanuts), said Mondlane.