

Machel probe takes up where TRC left off

Sun. Indep. 12/2/06 p.4

New evidence that has come to light on fatal crash adds weight to false beacon theory and introduces possible conspiracy

Did South Africa's apartheid government pay compensation to the Russian survivor of the mysterious plane crash in which Mozambican president Samora Machel and 34 others died?

And, if so, would it be an admission of guilt of its involvement? Circumstantial evidence that such a payment was made about five years after the crash is just one of many mysteries that still surround the fateful crash that happened on South African soil in 1986, at the height of apartheid repression and the Cold War conflict in the southern African region.

Allegations of foul play never died down, and any new inquiry would face the difficult task of untangling the many myths and urban legends from compelling evidence that Machel's death was not an accident.

The government announced this week it had launched an all-out pursuit of new evidence on the crash, after President Thabo Mbeki raised the need to bring closure to the issue in his state of the nation address.

In Cape Town this week, Charles Ngcakula, the safety and security minister, said: "We will deploy the best available resources, human and material, to deal with the matter. We owe it to the people of Mozambique, who as-

sisted our liberatory forces to topple apartheid and install the democratic dispensation that we have."

Ngcakula later confirmed that new evidence had come to light. It appears

a National Prosecuting Authority-led team has been assigned to investigate it.

A vital piece of evidence would be something to prove that an alleged false signal lured the Russian-built Tupolev aircraft off its course and to the mountainous terrain at Mbuzini, near the border with Swaziland.

Finding evidence of this, 20 years later, would be crucial, but a greater challenge perhaps lies in connecting the complex strands that made it possible to pull such an alleged ambush off and cover it up with at least some success.

The theory that a false - most likely mobile - very high frequency omnidirectional (VOR) beacon signal lured the plane off course was first advanced by the Russian and Mozambican members of the Margo Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the crash.

They later withdrew from the panel because they felt that the late Judge Cecil Margo did not treat them as equal partners in terms of international aviation practice, and they issued a minority report. Margo dismissed the

false beacon theory and ruled that the crash was caused by pilot error. He absolved South Africa of blame and suggested that the plane's inexplicable 34° turn that led to the tragedy was more likely caused by the plane following the signal from Swaziland's Matsapa Airport.

New evidence suggests that South African operatives were, on that same October night, "installing and testing" a new VOR at Matsapa.

In 1998 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) responded to calls to probe the crash afresh, but was left with little time and resources to do so. Yet a huge amount of evidence, much of it new, was assimilated. Although only some of the new allegations could be verified, mainly through a closed inquiry, a picture started to emerge that was in sharp contrast to the Margo view, raising a multitude of questions.

While most aviation experts still

reject the false beacon theory, the available circumstantial evidence of clandestine operations and massive troop movements in the Komatipoort area, overt and covert threats and misinformation from the apartheid government, as well as more tangible testimony of the deployment of electronic devices, clearly needed further scrutiny.

Careful not to unduly perpetuate the myths that have come to cling to the mystery crash, the TRC nevertheless strongly recommended the reopening of the inquiry. In 2000, top National Prosecuting Authority advocate Torie Pretorius was put on the job. He spent some months following up, among others, some of the leads thrown up through the TRC process, but without unearthing compelling new evidence. Other pressing investigations resulted in the shelving of the Machel probe.

Among a few new pieces of circumstantial evidence and allegations that have emerged since the TRC inquiry was that the Russian navigator/co-pilot

of the ill-fated plane was paid a lump sum by the then newly opened South African embassy in the early 1990s.

If this is true, a memo to this effect must still be in the department of foreign affairs archives. Those alleged to have authorised payment, including then foreign minister Pik Botha, have vehemently denied a payout, despite testimony to the contrary.

Some of the allegations and testimonies contained in the TRC's Machel file - assumed to be kept with other TRC files in the national archives - were indeed startling as they pointed to interest blocs in a number of southern African states. These included Machel's own Frelimo party and the then Malawian government, which allegedly had motives to conspire against him.

Unravelling the full context around a motive for a daring plot could prove diplomatically sensitive, although most southern African states pledged co-operation at the time of the TRC inquiry.

Even the casting of new light on apartheid military destabilisation and

the Cold War power games that held the region in its grip - painful as it may be - could serve as a unifying thread to bring South Africans and their neighbours closer together, as Mbeki envisaged in his address.

Among the questions the TRC raised after evidence was heard was the role of the late General Lothar Neethling, who removed the black box and returned it to the police only after legal threats were made. Minutes of the State Security Council and other state organs showed there was increasing impatience with Machel, despite South Africa's own flagrant disregard for the 1984 Nkomati accord.

Minutes from the Mozambican working group show that Craig Williamson and General Jac Buchner discussed the overthrow of Frelimo, while there is evidence of cover-up money transactions. Circumstantial evidence that the runway lights of Maputo Airport were switched off on the night of the crash, which would support the false beacon theory, seem to support a conspiracy. Even though this new probe, too, may be inconclusive, the mere effort to come to terms with an aspect of the multifaceted southern African truth is, however, likely to bring some of its own rewards.

● *Christelle Terreblanche took part in the TRC's Machel investigation*