

Innocent or not, the world no longer believes Pretoria's word

IF the air crash which killed Mozambican President Samora Machel and 33 others inside South African territory was purely a freak accident, South Africa can hardly blame the world for its scepticism.

The automatic assumption was that South Africa had done it.

The timing of the crash in the middle of deteriorating relations between South Africa and Mozambique, and after sabre-rattling warnings from Defence Minister Magnus Malan, was extraordinary.

Foreign Minister Pik Botha's denials meant nothing because, to much of the international community, the truth has long ceased to be a feature of Pretoria's activities in the subcontinent.

From inside South Africa it is difficult to understand the passions aroused by the crash and why the rest of the subcontinent, rightly or wrongly, has the impression that Pretoria is a bully boy which does as it pleases.

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In 1975, South Africa went to war with Angola without telling its own people. Since then it has been accused of providing covert support to surrogate armies fighting to overthrow the governments of Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho.

The Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) has estimated that up till a year ago South African destabilisation had cost other countries in the region more than \$10-billion (R25-billion).

SADCC says that destabilisation has caused widespread misery and death.

In only one example, it says some 100 000 people starved to death in Mozambique in 1983 because South African-backed Renamo guerrillas, in an attempt to destabilise Machel's government, actively prevented food aid reaching drought-stricken areas.

Only last week white gunmen raided a refugee office in Swaziland, removing the files on 800 people. A Defence Force spokesman, asked to comment, said: "It is unrealistic to expect the SADF to comment on every

incident that takes place in southern Africa."

South Africa's performance under the Nkomati Accord — if the captured Gorongosa diaries detailing continued South African support for Renamo are anything to go by — has further diminished Pretoria's reputation for trustworthiness.

None of this is evidence in itself of what happened on the fateful night of October 19.

But it is a perception which is no less valid than that created by Pretoria's prompt openness to involvement by the Mozambicans and other independent international aviation experts in finding out what happened.

On the basis of the details which have emerged so far it is impossible to deduce which theory — that it was pilot error, or that the plane was shot down — is correct.

Supporting the claim that the plane was shot down were the pilot's own words on Monday to that effect.

Was pilot error the cause ... or was his mistake just another incident in a bizarre chain of events?

However, he was reported to be suffering concussion at the time and, if the plane were not shot down, he would be first to be held responsible.

Other surviving passengers reported hearing a loud bang or a sound like a shot before the lights went out and the plane crashed.

Fernando Joao, the survivor whose account was published by the Mozambican news agency, Aim, was quoted as saying: "We heard the plane screech, it seemed that it was shot at."

However, what the passengers could have heard could have been the plane clipping the tops of trees before it crashed.

If the plane was shot down, the question arises: by who? A suggestion

has been made that it was Frelimo soldiers, but why would they want to shoot down a jetliner coming from inside their own territory?

Because of the dangerous security situation in central Mozambique it is probable that the Tupolev was not off course but in fact travelling a safer western route, rather than risk being shot down by Renamo.

In that case, Frelimo soldiers would not have been surprised by the jet using that airspace.

KaNgwane's Chief Minister, Enos Mabuza, said that judging by the inflow of refugees, there are few signs of Renamo activity in the area where the plane came down.

That leaves the SADF which, according to Botha, had the plane on their radar screens even before it entered Mozambique from Zimbabwe.

Backing up the second theory — of pilot error — are reports the pilot thought he was coming in to land in Maputo at a time when he was in fact some 70 km west of the capital.

The survivors have said they were asked to buckle up and prepare for the descent into Maputo, a fact confirmed by aviation authorities in Swaziland and Mozambique.

Several theories have emerged to explain this: that he mistook the radio beacon at Komatiport for Maputo, or that the Morse code signal for Nelspruit is identical to that for Maputo.

The pilot error theory raises questions about the operation of the Maputo air control tower which cleared the plane to land.

A strong indication of the pilot error theory is the fact that the Mozambican authorities have themselves not yet suggested that the plane was shot down.

At this stage it seems almost an accepted fact that the pilot made a mistake, but was his mistake the cause of the accident, or was it just another coincidence in a most bizarre string of events?