

Mozambique Jet Crash Still a Mystery

NYT.

27/1/57

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

Special to The New York Times

MAPUTO, Mozambique, Jan. 26 — Three months after a Soviet plane carrying Mozambique's President plunged into the South African highlands, the cause of the crash remains in dispute.

None of the facts disclosed to date have shaken a widespread suspicion here of foul play by South Africa against the popular Mozambican leader, Samora M. Machel, whose Marxist Government Pretoria had long sought to undermine.

The crash on Oct. 19 killed 34 other people, including Mr. Machel's closest advisers. Ten people survived.

Mozambican officials say a report compiled this month by a fact-finding commission of South African, Soviet and Mozambican experts raised more suspicions than it resolved — including the possibility that the presidential jet was drawn off course by a decoy radio beacon.

Demand That Inquiry Go On

The Russians and the Mozambicans he demanded that the three-country investigation continue, and refused to take part in a separate inquiry just concluded in South Africa by a panel that includes Frank Borman, the former astronaut and former head of Eastern Airlines. That report blames a series of errors by the crew for the crash.

In the report that was issued here by the three-country panel, there is agreement on several facts.

On an otherwise routine and trouble-free night approach to Maputo, the Mozambican capital, the Soviet TU-134 twin-engine jet suddenly turned to the right.

The plane was on automatic pilot, as it had been since leaving Zambia, and according to a transcript of the cockpit voice recorder salvaged from the wreckage, the Russian pilot noted the turn and asked why it was made.

Following Radio Signal

The navigator answered, "V.O.R. indicates that way." V.O.R., or very high frequency omni-directional radio, is a standard navigational instrument that is tuned to a signal emitted by the destination airport. The exchange suggests the crew assumed it was being guided toward the Maputo airport.

For the next 10 minutes, the pilot continued what he thought was a descent toward Maputo while he and other crew members expressed growing concern about not seeing the airport.

They asked the Maputo tower whether there was a power failure; they questioned whether there were clouds; they noted that none of the other instruments were registering the airport, and they heard the "terrain proximity" alarm in the plane. But they showed no awareness of the high ground below until they struck it at an altitude of 2,187 feet, near the borders of Swaziland and Mozambique, 39 miles from Maputo.

The Maputo tower, which has no radar, did not know the plane was off course, and Mozambique learned only

the next morning from South Africa that its President had been killed.

Some Mozambicans concede that the Soviet pilot may have shown poor judgment in persisting with the approach even as the warning signs multiplied. A tape suggests some misunderstanding between the crew and the tower over whether the airport lights were on, but the pilot seemed never to consider aborting his approach even as other navigation equipment failed to find Maputo and as the ground warning alarm continued to sound.

The fact-finding panel's report also noted that the Soviet crew did not file a flight plan before leaving Mbala, Zambia, where Mr. Machel had met with the heads of Zambia, Angola and Zaire.

Yet for Mozambique, the far more critical question is what drew the plane off to the right 11 minutes before the crash. The South Africans have suggested it may have been the radio beacon at the airport in Swaziland. But it uses a different frequency, and the Mozambicans say that the presidential jet may have been deliberately drawn off course by a decoy beacon.

"The factual report already contains the information that President Samora Machel's plane was following signals from a V.O.R. which was not that of Maputo," Lieut. Gen. Armando Guebuza, who headed Maputo's own inquiry into the crash, said last week. "It was this V.O.R. that was the origin of the fatal turn of the plane away from its normal route. It is therefore important to know what V.O.R. this was, where it was located, and whether it was genuine or a decoy."

In Johannesburg today, the South African Foreign Minister, Roelof P. Botha, denied there was any decoy beacon. "There was an accusation that somehow we installed a mystery beacon, which was a lie," he said. He asserted that repeated errors by the crew had caused the crash.

Suspicious Are Compounded

The Mozambican suspicions have been compounded by several other factors. One is that the plane went down in a closed South African military border zone, and that the South Africans did not tell Mozambique about the crash until the next morning. Another was testimony from witnesses that a large tent had stood 150 yards from the site where the plane went down and was taken down the day after the crash.

Apart from the plane's mysterious turn, the South African, Soviet and Mozambican investigators found no signs of trouble. The crew had ample experience flying in the region, and post-mortem examinations disproved earlier South African remarks that alcohol was found in the crew members' blood.

Most officials here say South Africa probably will not agree to resume the three-country investigation, and they expect Pretoria to push ahead with its own inquiry. That investigation, they say, is unlikely to resolve the mystery of the radio signal and with it the death of Mozambique's first President.

But the possibility that foul play may someday be proved is also troubling to people here. Impoverished by years of fighting a right-wing insurgency backed by South Africa, its army weak and disorganized and its economy in shambles, Mozambique is powerless against its potent southern neighbor. "If we did prove that they did it," said Carlos Cordosa, editor of the semi-official Mozambican press agency "what could we do about it?"