

Maputo Casts Further Doubts on Radio Signal Evidence in Machel Crash

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Excerpts from commentary:

There is more evidence to suggest that the radio signal which caused President Samora Machel's aircraft to take a fatal turn to the southwest did not come from a legitimate VOR [very high frequency omnidirectional radio] signal. South Africa has argued that President Samora Machel's Tupolev 134 was following the VOR transmitting from Matsapa, Swaziland's international airport located near the town of Manzini. But this argument does not explain certain concrete and decisive facts. In the first place, the route the aircraft was following in the last 10 minutes of the flight, when projected in a straight line over Swazi territory, passes dozens of kilometres to the east of Matsapa. But when a plane follows a VOR, it should eventually pass directly over the VOR, and Matsapa's VOR transmits from very close to the runway.

Secondly, there is the question of the radical 045 of Matsapa's VOR, as mentioned by the South African investigators at the hearing in Johannesburg into the crash. The investigation carried out so far indicates that the plane made a 37 degree turn to the south-west, in the zone between Magude and the South African border. When the navigator mentioned the VOR, the plane was already south-west of Magude. But, radical 045 of Matsapa's VOR would have cut into the aircraft's original flight when it really was heading towards Maputo, a few km north of the place where the turn happened. So, this, too, leads to the conclusion that the route followed by the plane has nothing to do with Matsapa's VOR.

On 20th January, the Frelimo Party Political Bureau demanded that the international inquiry into the facts of the crash continue, in order to investigate whether this VOR was legitimate or a decoy. Evidence now available suggests the existence of a decoy VOR transmitting on the same frequency as the Maputo VOR. It is important to find a plausible hypothesis for the objectives of a decoy VOR, since this might help in finding where it was situated. . .

There are two hypotheses that come to mind. The first is that the real aim of a decoy VOR was to attract the Tupolev into a flight path that would bring it at low altitude into South African airspace, where it would be shot down on the pretext that it was violating air space in a restricted military area. . . The second is that it was flying towards Maputo. Indeed, the crew really was convinced of this, as is evident from the cockpit voice recorder and from the tape of the communications between the plane and the Maputo air traffic control tower. From the crew's apparent certainty that they were on the right route one can infer that the VOR that had attracted the plane was transmitting on the same frequency as the Maputo VOR.

If the Matsapa hypothesis is rejected, and taking into account that in the area near the plane's route there is no other airport, then the thesis of a decoy VOR gains a credibility that is difficult to undermine.