

Machel Killed in Plane Crash

By Alan Cowell
New York Times Service

JOHANNESBURG — President Samora Machel, leader of Mozambique since its independence from Portugal in 1975, died in a plane crash on South African territory Sunday night, the South African government announced Monday.

The cause of the crash, which coincided with increasing strains in Mozambique's relationship with South Africa following the virtual collapse of a 1984 nonaggression pact, was not immediately known.

South African authorities said at least 26 persons, including Mr. Machel, 53, died in the crash and 10 survived, one of them thought to be a Soviet pilot. Mr. Machel's body, witnesses said, was almost unrecognizable.

The Mozambican leader's Soviet-made Tupolev jet crashed in a remote area of South Africa, close to the borders of Swaziland and Mozambique.

South African newspapers said it strayed over South Africa in bad weather. The border area is located in hilly country.

Mr. Machel had been meeting in northern Zambia with other southern African leaders to consider developments in the region.

Mr. Machel's powerful personality made him the unchallenged leader of his avowedly Marxist Mozambique Liberation Front, the nation's only lawful political movement. His death, coinciding with turmoil in many parts of southern Africa, offered new uncertainties for the region.

South Africa, which has backed Mozambican rebels seeking Mr. Machel's overthrow, made no mention of possible sabotage when it announced the Mozambican leader's death in a brief statement from the office of President Pieter W. Botha.

But many people beyond Pretoria's frontiers are certain to voice concern that the Mozambican leader's aircraft was sabotaged.

Such assertions seem certain to be reinforced by a threat earlier this month from South Africa's defense minister, Magnus Malan, who warned black-ruled neighbors that Pretoria offered them a choice: "either peace and cooperation, or conflict."

Alfred Nzo, the general secretary

of the the African National Congress, the most prominent of guerrilla organizations seeking the overthrow of apartheid, said in Copenhagen that the crash was a "deliberately committed crime" by South Africa or its Mozambican rebel allies.

Hours after South Africa announced Mr. Machel's death, Mozambique's officially controlled media had made no reference to his death, telling citizens only that he was "missing," had not returned on schedule from Zambia and that a crash in South Africa was under investigation. The radio began playing solemn music.

[Mozambique officially confirmed Mr. Machel's death Monday night, Reuters reported from Maputo, Mozambique.]

[Marcelino dos Santos, a Politburo member who broadcast a communiqué Monday morning that the president was overdue on a flight from Zambia, confirmed the death in a statement broadcast by official Radio Mozambique.]

Mr. dos Santos, in the earlier statement, urged Mozambicans to remain calm and "keep vigilant in order to neutralize any enemy action to provoke instability and any criminal behavior."

The appeal reflected official fears that guerrillas of the South Africa-supported Mozambique National Resistance, which has claimed major successes after an upsurge of activity in recent weeks, might try to press a perceived advantage.

The Mozambican Embassy in Lusaka said two cabinet ministers, Transport Minister Alcantara Santos and Deputy Foreign Minister Jose Carlos Lopo, were among the passengers.

South Africa's foreign minister, R.F. Botha, toured the area of the crash on a hilltop just inside South African territory in the so-called tribal homeland of Kangwane on Monday.

"Without Machel," he said in reference to Mozambique's civil war, "one is concerned that conflict will escalate."

South Africa, eager to avoid accusations that it played a role in the crash, said foreign aviation experts would be welcome to assist in any investigations.

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86

The meeting Mr. Machel attended in northern Zambia was apparently called to discuss the possibility of reopening Angola's Benguela Railroad, closed for a decade because of attacks by South African-backed Angolan rebels led by Jonas Savimbi. The railway starts in Zaire, and a Zairean diplomat traveling on Mr. Machel's plane was said to be among the dead.