

S African Foreign Minister on Decoding of Black Boxes

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Text of dispatch datelined Pretoria, 28th October (ME/8402/ii):

The possible transfer to Moscow of the four vital "black boxes" from Mozambican President Samora Machel's ill-fated aircraft has been delayed while South African authorities make absolutely sure that cannot be decoded elsewhere in the world to ensure complete impartiality when they are opened by investigators.

At a press briefing in Pretoria today, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Pik Botha, said after a lengthy meeting with Mr Justice Cecil Margo, who has been appointed head of the board of inquiry into the crash, that he had requested the United States government to make one of its aviation experts available to assist South Africa. The Russian investigators had said the black boxes could only be decoded in Moscow, "but we first want to be satisfied there is no other way this can be done. . . [agency ellipses] in the interest of all three countries involved".

According to international aviation laws, the Soviet Union, as the manufacturers of the aircraft, Mozambique as its country of registry, and South Africa on whose territory the crash took place, have to conduct the investigation jointly.

Mr Botha said a senior member of the South African team of aviation experts conducting the preliminary groundwork investigation at the scene of the crash would fly to Komatipoort to morrow to make certain proposals to the Russian investigators there. The Russians had wanted to leave for Moscow by tomorrow with the black boxes.

He emphasised it was not a question of the South African government not trusting the Soviet investigators, and said there had in fact been good co-operation with them so far in spite of severe ideological differences. There were four containers with technical flight data and cockpit voice recordings which were crucial in determining what happened in the last few moments before the accident. At the very least, if there were no other place besides Moscow the black boxes could be decoded, it should be possible to open the voice recording and have this analysed outside the Soviet Union, if not in South Africa.

"We are anxious to know what the recordings contain but we must be sure it is done impartially", he said. "I have today asked the US State Department to make available an expert in the field and to send him to South Africa to advise us if the play-backs can be done in South Africa or elsewhere."

Asked to respond to allegations South Africa was somehow responsible for the crash, Mr Botha said his government was "really not worried" about any findings that may be made. "I get the idea that some information has already leaked, the impression that various governments have ways of finding out what happened. . . [agency ellipses] I don't think you will get a responsible government leader who up to now has held South Africa responsible." The accusations were only coming from "hysterical politicians who are using President Machel's death for propaganda purposes in a scandalous manner".