

SUSPICION MOUNTS AS SA KEEPS BOXES

Herald
Harare
7 Nov 1986

By a Correspondent
MAPUTO.

SOUTH AFRICA'S refusal to hand over the vital black boxes recovered from the wreckage of the plane in which Mozambican President Samora Machel died is leading to mounting suspicion about the circumstances of the crash.

Cde Machel's Soviet-built Tupolev 134A jet crashed 200 m inside South Africa on October 19. The four black boxes which recorded various functions on the plane, including cockpit conversation, were recovered the following day.

A joint Mozambican, Soviet and South African commission of inquiry was immediately formed. On Friday, October 24, the team met at the South African town of Komatiport, apparently reaching agreement on several important points.

These included the team flying to Moscow the following night with the black boxes so they could be decoded at the Soviet factory which manufactured the Tupolev to Mozambique's specifications in 1980.

Mozambique made the

arrangements for Russian visas for the South African members of the team and their tickets via Paris and Berlin to Moscow.

But, on the day they were to leave, the South Africans told Mozambique they were not prepared to hand over the black boxes or go to Moscow as scheduled.

On October 28, the South Africans again agreed to go to Moscow with the boxes. They were scheduled to leave Maputo on an Aeroflot flight the following evening. But again, at the last moment, they said they would not go or surrender the boxes.

A further curious aspect about behind-the-scenes events since the crash is the refusal of Britain and the United States to become involved in the inquiry.

South Africa had approached both countries seeking an "independent" observer at the decoding and interpretation of the boxes in the Soviet Union. Both contacted the Mozambique government which informed them there was no objection to their presence. But both refused for "diplomatic

reasons".

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) was also approached by South Africa. But, having been expelled from ICAO, South Africa could not have expected a response. ICAO has now accepted an invitation from Mozambique, and three crash experts from Canada, Finland and New Zealand are due to arrive in Maputo this week.

It is at this point that South Africa must finally decide whether or not to hand over the boxes. It has used the fact that ICAO had not responded to its request as a reason for not handing over the boxes. But, once ICAO experts are in place, that excuse is no longer valid.

South Africa's usage of an ICAO presence has also been totally contradictory. On October 26 they said that, irrespective of the ICAO response, they would take the boxes to Moscow. The following day they told the inquiry team that if the ICAO had not responded by October 28, they would suspend the investigation.

In reality the inquiry is suspended. There has been no formal contact

between the South Africans and the other members of the inquiry team since October 29.

On that day the South Africans demanded that one of the boxes, the voice recorder with crew conversations, be opened and heard in South Africa before going to Moscow. They also wanted a copy of the tape recording of the Maputo control tower conversations with the plane before handing over the boxes.

Aviation experts point out that it is accepted international practice for the boxes to be decoded by the manufacturer. When a Boeing 737 crashed in northern Mozambique three years ago the boxes were sent to Seattle for decoding and interpretation.

The same experts say only the manufacturers can guarantee decoding the boxes without the risk of distortion or damage which would make it more difficult to ascertain the cause of the crash.

Mozambican officials are unwilling to speculate as to why South African authorities will not hand over the boxes. But this refusal, coupled with the

large amount of disinformation coming out of South Africa, has inevitably fuelled suspicions that this was not an ordinary crash.

South Africa's foreign minister, Mr "Pik" Botha, has said that the dead Soviet pilot, Cde Yuri Novodran, was drunk or inexperienced. In fact he had logged well over 13 000 hours, half of them on Tupolev 134s. In the 18 months he had been flying Cde Machel's jet he had landed at Maputo 65 times, over 70 percent at night.

Mozambican officials who have flown often with this crew say they have never known them to take a drink.

In addition, no results of medical tests have been given to the inquiry by the South Africans, and Mozambique has lodged an official protest over tampering with the bodies after incisions were found in the necks of five of the dead, including two crew members.

The most prevalent theory about the crash remains that the pilot was lured off course by a false navigational beacon plant-

Crash suspicion mounts

● From Page 1

ed inside South Africa. But not until South Africa surrenders the black boxes can investigators begin to try to ascertain the true reasons for the crash.

If South Africa does not surrender the boxes then it is unlikely the truth will ever be known. However such a refusal would leave a major question mark about South Africa's involvement making it extremely uncomfortable for some of its Western allies who are campaigning against terrorism.

● To Page 7