

5. AFRICA

Aviation Ministry Official Reports Soviet Analysis of Machel Crash

'Izvestiya' 1 Feb 87 (morning edition)

Text of "Details for 'Izvestiya'" interview with I.F. Vasin, USSR Deputy Minister of Civil Aviation, by B. Pilyatskin, "Sabotage of the presidential aircraft" (SU/8480/A5/1):

[Pilyatskin] It is more than three months since the tragic death of Mozambican President Samora Machel and a number of his companions in an air disaster. It is known that a special commission was set up to investigate what happened. Our readers would like to know how its work went.

[Vasin] First of all I would like to explain that since the Tu-134A aircraft which came down on South African territory was operated by Mozambique and manufactured in the Soviet Union, under the relevant provisions of the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO) the investigation was carried out on a trilateral basis, that is by South Africa with the participation of representatives of Mozambique and the USSR.

I may say that the commission worked fruitfully. The recordings of the on-board objective monitoring systems (the so-called "black boxes") were deciphered and studied, the radio exchange between the air crew and the air traffic controller at Maputo international airport was studied, data from the radar tracking of the plane was analysed and laboratory work was carried out. In addition, the commission inspected the site of the incident on South African territory not far from the Mozambican border, studied the components, systems and subassemblies of the Tu-134A aircraft which crashed and obtained eyewitness accounts.

The many materials accumulated over several weeks were studied, systematised and co-ordinated jointly. But when on 16th January the trilateral protocol on the report on the information obtained was signed, the South African representatives, apparently "forgetting" their earlier pledges to follow ICAO procedures, categorically refused to continue work within the framework of the joint commission to prepare a final report.

In this connection our side entered an official statement from the Soviet delegation in the 16th January protocol. It points out that it is necessary in full accordance with ICAO requirements to carry out a joint study of the analysis and conclusions on the basis of the results of the investigation. Any other procedure is contrary to international rules and cannot be accepted by the Soviet side.

[Pilyatskin] What specifically do these rules say?

[Vasin] I shall quote, for instance, paragraph 6.11 of appendix 13 to the Chicago convention of 1944.

It says: "The state carrying out the investigation should send a draft of the final report to all the countries which took part in the investigation, asking them to put forward any important and substantiated observations on this report as soon as possible." That seems clear. Instead, the South African authorities unilaterally adopted a decision that the final document should be prepared not by the joint commission, but by the court which began its hearings in Johannesburg on 20th January.

[Pilyatskin] Judging from reports in certain Western mass information organs, anti-Soviet circles are using the court sessions to distract the world public's attention from a consideration of the true causes of the accident to the presidential aircraft. On South Africa's prompting, fabrications are once again being whipped up about "errors" by the crew which supposedly led to the disaster. Is it possible on the basis of the available information to draw a conclusion on what really happened on that fateful evening of 19th October last year?

[Vasin] Since South Africa's actions have torpedoed the work of the trilateral commission, we were faced with the need to carry out our own analysis of the available factual materials and issue a conclusion on the aviation incident.

All the materials collected show that throughout the flight the Tu-134A aircraft, its power units, systems, components and subassemblies, and the on-board navigational instruments and radio equipment, were in working order. The crew followed the chosen route strictly, with a deviation from the flight path of not more than four to six km, which is entirely permissible. Incidentally, this conclusion agrees with the opinion of the trilateral commission, which noted in its report: "During the flight there were no failures or malfunctions in the operation of the aircraft's systems."

Weather conditions were also normal, as is recorded in the report of the trilateral commission, which noted: "The weather forecast was favourable for the flight. . . Actual reports on the weather agreed with the forecast."

As for the crew's actions, a study of the materials of the investigation confirms that throughout the flight they were fit to work, in full control of the situation, maintaining prompt communications with the air traffic controller at Maputo airport and reacting appropriately, so to speak, to navigational information arriving on board. Let me remind you of what our newspapers reported after the disaster. All the crew members were qualified first-class specialists and their training, psychophysical condition and accumulated experience on international flights as well as flights on Mozambican routes with landings at Maputo airport, including night flights, were fully in accordance with the strictest demands. This was confirmed by the trilateral commission.

[Pilyatskin] Yet soon after the disaster the story was put forward in South Africa that alcohol was found in the blood of certain crew members. The other day Foreign Minister R. Botha was forced at last to admit that South African aviation experts had invented this false story. Clearly the South African officials' attempts to slander the Soviet crew failed. But what can you say about the statements at the Johannesburg "investigating commission" under the chairmanship of the South African judge (?Sesila Margo) by the representatives of Britain and the USA, in particular American astronaut Frank Porman?

[Vasin] Yes, I have read foreign agencies' reports citing the opinions of these experts, who denigrate the actions of the Tu-134A crew. Let me observe that the British and US representatives did not take part in the work of the trilateral commission or conduct the preliminary investigation. Now they are using their names to cover South Africa's attempts to pass off the Johannesburg session as some kind of "international forum". Their participation in a court whose sole aim is to hide the truth must be a matter for their own consciences.

Every unbiased person who considers the accumulated facts rightly asks: if the material component, namely the aircraft, was functioning normally, the experienced crew was healthy and the flight took place in normal weather conditions, what made the Presidential Tu-134A, on its way to Maputo, suddenly veer 37 degrees to the right 96 km before landing?

There can be only one answer to this very important question. The lack of objective causes of the disaster on board the aircraft means that the causes existed OUTSIDE it. After analysing the recordings made by the on-board voice recorder, experts on the trilateral commission picked out a key phrase which casts light on the events. In reply to observations by the aircraft's commander in connection with a swerve to the right, the navigator stated in his report: "the VOR points that way." The VOR is a VHF-omni-directional radio beacon, and by all appearances information was received from it by the aircraft's on-board navigational systems.

Laboratory studies of the electronic components of these systems have confirmed that the on-board navigational system was set strictly on the frequency of the

Maputo airport beacon. On precisely that frequency a more powerful, false beacon was transmitting deliberately incorrect information, which caused the aircraft to change course. As a result it hit the ground at an altitude of 665 metres among mountains.

[Pilyatskin] Ivan Fedotovich! At one session of the Johannesburg court it was claimed that if the crew was using another beacon, it was the beacon at Matsapa, Swaziland.

[Vasin] This is a flagrant attempt to cover tracks leading directly to South Africa. People there must know that the frequency on which the officially registered Swaziland beacon operates is quite different from the Maputo beacon.

[Pilyatskin] Is there other objective evidence that a false VOR was operating?

[Vasin] Yes, evidence was presented by the Mozambican side. The point is that in the evening of 19th October a Boeing 737-200 belonging to the Mozambican airline LAM was flying to Maputo from Beira 50 minutes after the Tu-134A. Like the presidential plane, it too deviated to the right from its route, and followed a parallel course in the direction of the site of the incident. But since the Maputo airport zone had been closed, the air traffic controller sent the Boeing back to Beira. According to the crew's statement they were trusting entirely to the indications of the on-board navigational systems, set on the Maputo VOR, and would have continued the flight without making any alteration to their course.

It should be added that at the place where the Tu-134A fell in South Africa, the trilateral commission discovered the traces of a concealed army-style camp. It was at a distance of some 150 metres from the remains of the aircraft. According to eyewitness accounts the camp was abandoned the day after the disaster.

[Pilyatskin] So to sum up -

[Vasin] All the circumstances of the aircraft crash taken together leave no doubt that it was the result of sabotage. The deliberate influence of effective land-based radio systems located outside the limits of Maputo airport led the aircraft to deviate from its set course and hit the ground on South African territory.