A new look at Machel death

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LATE on the night of October 19, 1986, a Russian-built Tupolev jet with nine crew members and 35 passengers on board departed Zambia for a three-hour flight back to Maputo, Mozambique.

The flight, routine for the experienced crew, met disaster as the aircraft descended towards what they thought was the Maputo Airport.

As they neared the ground, the Captain exclaimed: "There is no Maputo!"

Minutes later the Tupolev 134 crashed into a hillside in the Eastern Transvaal, killing 34 people. One was President Samora Machel.

What happened that night?

The aircraft had been properly maintained and loaded correctly, the crew members were qualified, the weather at Maputo was not a factor and the runway lights were operating normally.

South Africa, the Soviet Union and Mozambique conducted investigations into the crash ... and all three had different explanations.

The South African report on the disaster, which was accepted by the West, blamed crew error.

A Mozambican report — rejected by the commission but attached to its report as an appendix — said a beacon positioned close to where the aircraft crashed had lured it to destruction.

A similar but more technically explicit explanation was presented by the Russian investigators, but they said the rogue beacon was inside Mozambique territory.

Colonel Des Lynch, the officer commanding Air Force Base Ysterplaat and one of three men who investigated the disaster for the commission, has rejected the explanations of the Mozambicans and Russians.

In an interview with Weekend Argus he said: "There have been insinuations of a cover-up. South Africa may have done many despicable things in the past, but this was *not* one of them."

Colonel Lynch is writing a book on the crash and hopes to publish it before 1993.

He believes the disaster was the result gross errors and lack of flight discipline by the crew.

No flight plan was filed or given over the air, the number of persons on board was incorrectly given, the endurance of the Tupolev was miscalculated and, as a result, there was not enough fuel to divert to the aircraft's alternative field.

The navigator made an unexplained right turn, diverting the aircraft from its expected flightpath. He executed this turn without question from either the pilot or co-pilot.

During the descent, the crew faced a variety of distractions which drew their attention away from the vital task of monitoring the flightpath.

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