The mystery remains

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NELSON MANDELA'S pledge to uncover the "truth" of the 1986 Samora Machel air crash highlights the unsatisfactory outcome of the Margo Commission of Inquiry which blamed the tragedy on pilot error.

The inquiry was flawed by the refusal of the Mozambican and Russian governments to exercise their right of representation as well as blocking the appearance of apparently key witnesses.

Judge Cecil Margo was left to construct an explanation in collaboration with the South African authorities. The judge, a former pilot, is highly regarded; he had the assistance of experienced fellow commissioners and there has been no suggestion that they were involved in any sort of cover-up.

But the way in which the South African security forces and the National Party government duped Judge Louis Harms's hit squad inquiry points to the ease with which commissions can be fooled by those with state resources.

The central question facing the commission was why the aircraft made a turn at 19 167 feet which sent it hurtling into a South African hill-side.

Mozambique and Russia, although they failed to appear at the inquiry, publicly blamed a "decoy" radio beacon which interfered with the legitimate beacon at Maputo and lured the aircraft into the wrong trajectory.

But the decoy beacon would have needed about twice the power of the Maputo transmitter and — requiring a three-ton lorry to carry the equipment, which would have included an antenna 15ft high and 15ft wide — would probably have been seen on the ground. Another aircraft which was in the air at the time was not similarly affected. And the competing transmitters would have sent the plane on a curved, rather than straight path.

Yet the explanation provided by the South African aviation authorities also appeared full of holes. The hypothesis can be summed up as follows:

The plane was flying with the help of a navigational ground beacon at Maputo. At a critical stage, said the South African experts, the co-pilot may have switched to an alternate beacon in Swaziland.

At that precise moment, the navigator may have fed a bearing into the navigation system on the assumption that it was locked into the Maputo beacon.

Because they were in fact locked into Swaziland, rather than Maputo, the bearing caused them to turn right instead of left. The co-pilot then switched back to the Maputo beacon (this has to be assumed, because the instrument was found, after the crash, to have been tuned into Maputo).

It is the nature of such a hypothesis that it can be destroyed by a single flaw. And there are aspects of evidence which might have provided fruitful grounds for challenge to this one, with the sort of rigorous cross-examination which might have been expected from Soviet or Mozambican lawyers — backed up by expert advisors.

For example, the investigators knew that the fatal turn was based on a radio beacon reading, because the cockpit voice recorder has the captain questioning the turn and the navigator replying: "VOR indicates that way" — VOR being the type of beacon. But it is difficult to understand why the co-pilot — in control of the aircraft at that stage — did not pick up the exchange and make the point that he had been tuned into the Swazi beacon.

This might be explained by inattention on the co-pilot's part (there is evidence that he may have been listening to a Russian broadcasting station with half an ear at the time). But there is a further objection.

It can be assumed that the co-pilot's (supposed) cross-check on the Swazi beacon would have been swift. But there is a course indicator dial in front of the navigator. And the moment the co-pilot switched back to Maputo (after the turn), the needle on the navigator's dial would have swung to the left, warning him he was off course. But in the 10 minutes between the turn and impact the navigator failed to act.

Witnesses suggested that the navigator might have seen this swing on his dial, when he (the navigator) later made a cryptic comment: "There is something I don't understand ahh ..."

But even that comment was made a full four minutes before the crash. And it is extremely difficult to understand why — at a time when there was total confusion among the crew as to where they were — the man responsible for establishing their position failed, for four minutes, to either act, or to point out to his colleagues that the instrument was telling them they were way off course.

WM. 25-31/10/96 p. 13