

Pik Botha on Machel Plane Crash: Crew Displayed "Lack of Professionalism"

(a) SAPA in English 0352 gmt 1 Nov 86

Text of dispatch datelined Pretoria, 1st November:

The Russian pilots of the aircraft that crashed and killed President Samora Machel were not only hampered by dated and obsolete equipment, but also neglected to heed instrument warnings available to them, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Pik Botha, said in Pretoria this morning.

Mr Botha, reacting to reports that South Africa was responsible for the air disaster that killed President Machel and several others on 19th October, said it was important that the world realised the Russian-built aircraft was not equipped with an automatic ground proximity warning system to warn pilots should they descend below a specific altitude. He said he wanted to announce these facts in the light of details which had come to the attention of South African authorities and in the face of allegations that South Africa had been responsible for the crash.

Mr Botha said the instruments on the aircraft were set at zero, indicating they had no warning the aircraft was flying close to the ground. "This exposed a serious lack of professionalism", Mr Botha said. He said the outdated instruments also indicated the aircraft was "locked-in" on Maputo's radio beacon when it was 74 kms from Maputo. "Evidence supplied by the survivors and others indicated that the pilots were prepared for a normal landing at Maputo airport, but the instruments indicated the pilots had ignored instrument readings", Mr Botha said. Mr Botha alleged further there was alcohol in the blood of at least two of the crew members.

He said South Africa had information that Mozambican authorities had launched a sea rescue operation shortly after the crash. This indicated Maputo airport feared the

aircraft had crashed into the sea, he said. The air crew were in verbal communication with Maputo airport air control, and Mr Botha said the tape recording of the communication with the airport would "prove beyond doubt that the crew were prepared for a normal landing. There is no evidence of any explosion or abnormal activity at any time while the aircraft was still in the air. It still remains a mystery why the Maputo authorities kept the disappearance of the aircraft secret until after the South African government had informed them of the accident."

He said the South African investigation team had requested that the Maputo government make available the tape recording of the communication between the air crew and Maputo airport's air control as well as the aircraft's flight plan. The Mozambican government had not adhered to the request. "Surely it is not necessary to send that recording to Moscow to be decoded?" Mr Botha asked.

He said arrangements had been made for the South African investigation team to go to Maputo on Monday to acquire information about the aircraft's maintenance, the air crew's proficiencies and experience and to interview the Maputo airport air control personnel who were on duty on 19th October.

Mr Botha added the air disaster made it impossible "for Professor de Braganca, Rector of the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo to visit me this week as we had planned". Prof de Braganca died in the crash.

"The two of us would have discussed arrangements for a meeting between the State President, Mr P.W. Botha, and President Machel in order to clear up differences and misunderstandings between the two governments", Mr Botha said.

(b) Johannesburg television in English (i) 0620 gmt (ii) 1800 gmt 1 Nov 86

(i) Text of live interview with Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha by David Hall-Green on the "Good Morning South Africa" programme:

[Hall-Green] Well, as you heard in the latest news bulletin at 0600 [local], a large part, in fact the bulk of that bulletin, was devoted to the latest developments about the crash of President Samora Machel's aircraft on the 19th [October], and Foreign Minister Mr Pik Botha's statement this morning and giving new information regarding that air crash. Well, the Minister is on the phone now live from Pretoria. Good morning, Mr Minister.

[Botha] Good morning to you.

[Q] Mr Minister, you announced that you and Judge Margo would invite experts from other countries to advise the South African government on the process of decoding flight data and cockpit voice recorders. Have you succeeded in getting any of these experts to actually come to South Africa?

[A] We are at this moment in the process of negotiating with some other governments and consulting with them on this very issue, and we have good reason to believe that there are governments in the Western world who will be prepared to make available to us such experts. Yes, the answer is yes.

[Q] There are reports to the effect that the South African air force saw this flight on their radar screens and was aware of the fact that it faded at a certain stage shortly after 2100 [local] that evening. Does this imply that the air force did nothing about it?

[A] No, no, no, no, there is nothing - you know truth is stranger than fiction. People do not seem to know how radar functions. Every radar station has a, what we call an horizon beyond which it cannot see any object. You cannot see an aircraft once it has passed over a mountain for instance and is on the other side, and there is no direct link in the area any longer. This is a regular thing. The South African radar station there surveys

and monitors all flights. There are quite a number of flights in that vicinity of the Kruger Park and so on. So there is nothing strange for them. They must be seeing virtually all the flights fading or disappearing at some stage or another. They can't forever watch them flying thousands and thousands of miles away.

[Q] So the flight passes beyond their sphere of influence or control?

[A] That's a normal thing. Anybody knowing anything about it would immediately tell you so and there was nothing strange about this flight because it was on the normal route well within Mozambican territory, and it just disappeared from the screen at that moment. No one monitoring that radar could have or would have imagined that there was anything, you know, strange about it.

[Q] What is the situation now, Mr Minister, about the four recording instruments that were sealed and locked up. I believe they were sealed in the presence, immediately after the crash, in the presence of Mozambican authorities. Are these going to be sent to Moscow?

[A] Well, let me put it to you like this. We were told that these recorders could only be read or decoded in Moscow where they have the machines or apparatus to do so. Now this is precisely why we are consulting with certain other governments and why we are in the progress of asking them to make available to us experts in this particular field, namely in the field of reading Soviet-manufactured recorders. We want to make sure that no one tampers with the contents of those recorders, and I think it is in the interest of all parties involved here. In other words, the South African government is as keen or anxious as any other party to have the contents of those recorders revealed or read or be made known. But we want to assure that it is done in such a way that we cannot be accused later or any other while that they were being tampered with.

[Q] Earlier this week there was an on-off, on-off sort of situation regarding the possibility of South Africans going to Moscow. What actually finally happened there in that situation?

[A] Our team members under Mr (?Germishuys) is still in consultation with the Russian and Mozambique technicians. A proposal was made. I can tell you that they would be prepared - Maputo - to hand over to us the recorded version of the conversation of communication that must have taken place between the air crew and the air traffic control centre in Maputo. Now our team is going to Maputo on Monday [3rd November] to discuss the handing over of this tape recording to us because we believe it is very elementary - that need (?not) to be decoded. And then we will discuss with the Russians and the Mozambique officials our point of view on the recorders that we have here. It is, as far as we are concerned, not delaying the matter but explaining to them that we want to be sure.

The Russians were quite prepared to have a team of South African experts fly with them to Moscow to be present at the decoding process of their recorders. And again it is not that I assume that they will be cheating, but you see once you open that seal, the seal of any of those recorders and you are not an expert and you do not know what is going to happen with that thing once you put it into a decoding machine, how do I know that some fictitious message or whatever is not going to be produced to us as the real conversation that took place.

So we must make absolutely sure, and I think there are governments in other countries who support us in this view and who do not for a moment think that this is strange. On the other hand they do have these recordings of that conversation between the tower, the air tower in Maputo and the crew. Why don't they just make it known? Why don't they play it to the world immediately? We do not fear any facts.

[Q] Are you confident that Maputo will make these recordings available to you?

[A] Well, they should in terms of the applicable international convention. When information is readily available each party is under an obligation to make that

information available. You take the flight plan; we also asked for the flight plan. Now surely that must be something that is not secret at all. You can make it available immediately. So far we have not received the flight plan, but our team will probably on Monday discuss all these matters and maybe they'll succeed in obtaining that recording as well as the flight plan.

[Q] Mr Minister, thank you very much for being with us on "Good Morning South Africa this morning for and clarifying a number of points as you have done. Thank you sir.

[A] Thank you so much.

(ii) Tape of recorded interview with Foreign Minister Pik Botha:

[Announcer] Foreign Minister Pik Botha has revealed that at least two crew members of the ill-fated Tupolev aircraft in which President Samora Machel was killed had consumed alcohol. Mr Botha also rejected suggestions that South African radar control had seen the aircraft crash but had done nothing about it. He said all aircraft disappeared from screen when they went beyond the radar horizon. Mr Botha, who was reacting to reports that South Africa was responsible for the air disaster, said the Russian pilots were not only hampered by dated and obsolete equipment, but had failed to heed warnings available to them. He told Chris Olckers that he had decided to release these details because of accusations from certain quarters.

[Botha - video recording] They do not play the game according to the rules at all. They send all sorts of stories into the world, which are believed, and which contribute towards a further bad perception of South Africa and what we stand for and what we do, and it was just felt that, in respect of those facts which we now know cannot be altered, that we should make known some of those facts.

[Olckers] How modern was this aircraft?

[A] It is obsolete. It is old, definitely. Its equipment [changes thought] It still has, or had, valves in its radio equipment.

[Q] Is there any indication who exactly was in control of the aircraft, and did they pay any attention to their instruments just before the aircraft crashed?

[A] Information I received from one of our medical experts is that at least two crew members had alcohol in their blood. I do not know what percentage, but they had alcohol, and I am told that in the case of a pilot, when he is flying - it does not matter how small that percentage is - the smallest percentage is already considered improper. There has been some difficulty in finding out exactly who were the commander, the two pilots, and who was the navigator, flight engineer and so on.

But that is not important. What is important I think is the fact that as the pieces of evidence are being put together now, it is quite clear that the crew did not pay attention to their instruments, to their instrument panel, and the readings on those instruments. For instance, there is an instrument on board that aircraft - not an automatic one, there should be an automatic one - which normally would warn the crew if they descend below a certain level, a certain altitude, warning them that you are now below that safe altitude needed, or level, to descend for landing. Now, not only was there no automatic instrument to warn them - they call it, I think, ground proximity warning system - but there were instruments which you could set by hand, manually. Those instruments, in the case of this aircraft, were set at zero. So, that in itself, I am told by experts, would constitute a lack, an inadequacy, of professionalism in the part of any pilot.

Why did not the Maputo authorities announce that the plane was missing? Have you got any indication what their reaction was immediately after the accident?

[A] No. This is quite frankly what is somewhat puzzling, if not mysterious. Nobody seems to ask why did the Maputo government keep quiet about this accident.

[Q] There has been some controversy regarding the black box. Will this box go to Russia or not?

[A] I do not know at this stage. I cannot say so definitely, one way or the other. But what is important at this stage is that we are endeavouring to obtain expert knowledge, technical knowledge, on the question as to whether the contents, particularly of the cockpit voice recorder, could be decoded, made known in a way which will without any doubt establish the authenticity of the recording. To us that is of extreme importance. It is not that I assume that the Russians will cheat, but I think it is also in their interests that there should be no doubt whatsoever.

[Q] As far as the flight plan is concerned, have the South African investigators received this, and have they had any access to the tape recording of the discussion between the pilot of the ill-fated plane and Maputo ground control?

[A] No, no, strangely. Our team asked for this, they asked for the flight plan, which should be a very simple matter, a very elementary matter. There is nothing secret about it. It is general civil aviation practice. They have not yet handed it to us. And that is an important document now. Secondly, the conversation, the communication between the aircraft crew and the aircraft control centre in Maputo airport - that, of course, in the cockpit voice recorder, which now the Russians tell us can only be decoded in Moscow. But nevertheless, leave that aside. The fact is, it should be a very simple matter for Maputo airport to release that recording, because surely that would not be coded. It is not normal to speak - when you come in to land - in coded or secret languages. It is probably in English.