

# Special Investigation into the death of President Samora Machel

## ■ INTRODUCTION

- 1 On 19 October 1986, the Mozambican presidential aircraft, a Tupolev TU 134A-3 was returning from Zambia after the Lusaka Summit to be in time for Ms Graça Machel's birthday. President Samora Machel and twenty-four others died when the plane crashed in the mountainous terrain near Mbuzini near Komatipoort. The crash site is in the little triangle where the borders of Swaziland and Mozambique meet the South African border in the Lebombo Mountains.
- 2 The Margo Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate the crash and concluded that it had been caused by pilot error. A Soviet team also conducted an investigation into the incident, and concluded that a decoy beacon had caused the plane to stray off-course before it crashed into the mountains at Mbuzini.
- 3 This Commission's investigation into the matter did not find conclusive evidence to support either of these conclusions. Circumstantial evidence collected did, however, question the conclusions reached by the Margo Commission.

## ■ METHODOLOGY

- 4 All available evidence was collected and analysed by the Commission, including documents and interviews. Finally, an *in camera* hearing, in terms of section 29 of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (the Act), was held at the Commission's offices in Cape Town and Johannesburg to enable commissioners to test the veracity of evidence presented by witnesses.
- 5 Witnesses at the hearings included:
  - Ms Graça Machel, the widow of President Samora Machel (and now the wife of President Mandela);

- Dr Abdul Minty, former honorary secretary of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and current deputy director general in the Department of Foreign Affairs;
  - Mr JNJ van Rensburg, attorney for the Margo Commission;
  - “Ben” (real name withheld to protect his identity), former Military Intelligence (MI) officer;
  - Major Craig Williamson, former South African security force spy;
  - Mr Anton Uys, former security police officer who headed the South African Police (SAP) investigation immediately after the crash;
  - “James” (real name withheld to protect his identity), former Koevoet member and subsequent MI officer.
- 6 The Commission’s Investigation Unit interviewed many others in an attempt to arrive at the truth.

## ■ INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS

### The context

- 7 A police video in the Commission’s possession shows South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha telling journalists at the crash site that President Samora Machel and others killed in the crash were his and President PW Botha’s very good friends, and that their deaths were therefore a tragedy for South Africa. However, cabinet minutes record that, for several months before the crash, tensions between South Africa and Mozambique were increasing.
- 8 Shortly before the crash, the Mozambican chief of staff accused the Malawi government of President Hastings Banda of assisting “South African surrogates” (RENAMO, the National Resistance Movement in Mozambique) to set up bases in Malawi, and of issuing travel documents to, amongst others, the RENAMO leader.
- 9 A month before the crash, President Machel confronted President Banda in the presence of his Zambian and Zimbabwean counterparts in an acrimonious exchange in Blantyre. President Banda was given an ultimatum to stop his activities or

Mozambique would close its borders with Malawi. After the meeting, President Machel called a news conference at Maputo airport, saying that he would place missiles along the border with Malawi and would not hesitate to launch a pre-emptive strike if necessary.

- 10 Following this, thousands of RENAMO troops left Malawi and entered northern Mozambique. An escalation of hostilities ensued, threatening to divide Mozambique in two.
- 11 In addition, weeks before the crash, six South Africans died in a landmine explosion on the border with Mozambique. South African Defence Minister Magnus Malan threatened President Machel openly for the first time – “he will clash head-on with South Africa” – and alleged that Mozambique had renewed its support for the African National Congress (ANC). This was followed by the termination of 58 000 Mozambican jobs in South Africa, a devastating blow to the fragile economy. South African military activity in Mozambique increased rapidly.
- 12 It is clear from cabinet minutes at this time that the South African government believed Mozambique to be on the verge of collapse.
- 13 On the night of the crash, President Machel was returning from the Lusaka Summit, which had focused on the liberation of the region.
- 14 After the crash, Foreign Minister Pik Botha alleged that the Lusaka Summit had plotted the overthrow the government of Malawi. No proof of this exists.
- 15 Further, the State Security Council (SSC) minutes from January 1984 indicate that the Mozambican working group, including General Jac Buchner and Major Craig Williamson, discussed how to help RENAMO overthrow the FRELIMO government (of Mozambique). Later in the same month, the SSC secretariat discussed RENAMO’s chances of success.
- 16 Ms Graça Machel told the Commission that she believed that the Malawi government had held a crisis meeting in February 1984 – after President Machel had threatened to close off Malawi’s access to the sea if that country did not cease its aid to RENAMO. The possibility of assassinating Machel was allegedly discussed. According to Ms Machel, who gave moving testimony, this proposal was later put to President Banda. The following week, Banda dispatched his senior officers to South Africa for a meeting with President PW Botha, who sent back a message of solidarity.

- 17 A South African delegation headed by Defence Minister Magnus Malan travelled to Malawi and met with President Banda.
- 18 Ms Machel believed that the meeting discussed the formation of a special team to monitor the Mozambican president and to recruit senior Mozambican officials to co-operate with them. They allegedly even discussed the recruitment of an official at the Mozambican control tower.
- 19 A Zambian pilot, Mr Frankeson Zgambo, was recruited and trained by Major Craig Williamson to gather information about President Machel. Major Williamson admitted to this, but insisted that he knew nothing of a plot to assassinate the President.
- 20 There is no doubt that President Machel was under enormous pressure at the time of his death, not least because of divisions in his own party. Ms Graça Machel confirmed previous attempts on his life, attacks on his residences and attempts by South Africa to attack the Mozambican capital. He was also engaged in a radical restructuring of both his cabinet and the military, which could have upset a number of high-ranking Mozambicans.

## **The crash**

- 21 Of the thirty-four people on board the presidential aircraft at the time of the crash, only nine survived.
- 22 One of the survivors walked to a nearby house to ask for help. Arriving back at the scene, he found security force officers already there. Others who arrived to assist, including a nurse, told the Commission that they were chased from the site. They also reported that the security force officers were seen rummaging through the wreckage and confiscating documents. Foreign Minister Pik Botha and Mr Niel Barnard, head of the National Intelligence Service, admitted that documents had been removed from the scene for copying.
- 23 Mozambique was informed about the incident only a full nine hours after it happened, after a massive land and sea search. The Commission heard evidence that the Mozambican Minister of Security contacted the South African security forces as soon as the Mozambican authorities realised the plane was missing. They were not informed about the accident.

## The Margo enquiry

- 24 The day after the crash, Mozambique and South Africa agreed that an international board of enquiry should be established with the participation of the International Civil Aviation Organisation. According to the Chicago Convention, South Africa, as the state on whose territory the crash had occurred, would head up the investigation. South Africa was, however, obliged to work in partnership with the state of ownership (Mozambique) and the state of manufacture (the Soviet Union). These countries were not, however, taken on as equal partners, and withdrew their participation after the initial stages.
- 25 The investigation was delayed for several weeks by General Lothar Neethling's refusal to hand over the cockpit voice recorder (the black box), which he had seized at the scene of the crash. Colonel Des Lynch, who headed the police investigation, told the Commission that it took a letter from a lawyer to persuade Neethling to release the box to the investigators.
- 26 The Margo Commission of Enquiry concluded that the aircraft had been airworthy and fully serviced and that there was no evidence of sabotage or outside interference. The board:
- unanimously determined that the cause of the accident was that the flight crew failed to follow procedural requirements for an instrument let-down approach, but continued to descend under visual flight rules in darkness and some cloud without having contact with the minimum safe altitude and minimum assigned altitude, and in addition ignored the Ground Warning Proximity alarm.*
- 27 The Soviet delegation issued a minority report, which stated that, their expertise and experience had been undermined. They advanced the theory of a false beacon, although Mr Justice Margo denied in his report that this charge was formally laid before the board.
- 28 The Soviet report focused on the 37 degrees' right turn that led the plane into the hills of Mbuzini. It rejected the finding of the Margo Commission, saying that the crew had read the ground proximity warning as false since they believed themselves to be in flat terrain as they approached landing.
- 29 A former television journalist who was allowed to attend the on-site investigations by the joint Soviet, Mozambican and South African team told the Commission

that the television crew was approached on the first afternoon by an investigator of the Directorate of Civil Aviation who was holding a device the size of a pound of butter. The investigator informed the television crew that this could have been a frequency scrambler.

- 30 During the Margo enquiry, members of the Margo enquiry team told a journalist that the device had been found to be harmless. However, an expert on mobile beacons told the Commission that the device could have decoded the aeroplane's signal, locked onto it and been used to interfere in the direction of the aircraft.

## **The VOR beacon**

- 31 The report of the Margo enquiry includes a reference to the fatal turn made by the aircraft, stating that it was following the signals of a VOR (very high frequency omnidirectional radio) which was not that of Maputo. Mr Justice Margo argued that the beacon at Matsapa airport in Swaziland, which had a similar code, might have led the plane astray.
- 32 The Commission received information that the Matsapa airport company, SASEA, had been run by a well-known alleged member of the Italian Mafia with close links to the South African security establishment. Intelligence reports provided by the National Intelligence Agency show that airport control in Maputo had fallen into the same hands. Control over the Matsapa airport and the Maputo control tower would have been essential to the success of a decoy beacon.
- 33 A South African Airways (SAA) signal expert, Mr Paul Gelpin, was emphatic that "the only way that a rogue beacon could have worked was if there was an accomplice at the Maputo VOR who switched it off for the critical period of the plot". This possibility is strengthened by allegations that Mr Cornelio Vasco Cumbe (alias Roberto Santos Macuacua), who worked at the control tower at Maputo airport, had been recruited by the South African security forces. Moreover, Dr Abdul Minty revealed that the tapes at the Maputo airport had been lost.
- 34 Regarding the existence of a mobile decoy beacon, a South African Air Force flight sergeant, who was at 4AD Snake Valley near Pretoria during 1986 told the Commission that he had seen a friend building such a beacon in the month before the crash. He described the assembly and workings and provided technical sketches and background to illustrate the beacon's appearance and operation. It had left the base with its builder during the weekend of the crash and was returned the following week.

- 35 The flight sergeant testified that such a beacon could have been used to divert and bring down a plane. The Commission was given the name of the person who built the beacon and the person who gave the orders for it to be built.
- 36 Two pilots flying in the area that night have said the Maputo signal came on unusually early.
- 37 In August 1998, the Commission was given the name of a person who is alleged to have erected a decoy beacon on the side of the mountain at Mbuzini. The end of the lifespan of the Commission's Human Rights Violations Committee at the end of August 1998 prevented the investigators from corroborating this information.
- 38 Investigations also revealed that, had there not been an intention to bring the aircraft down, the South African authorities could have prevented the incident, or at least ensured fewer casualties. There is no doubt that the South African authorities had the ability to monitor the aircraft. According to Dr Minty, the head of the South African Air Force responded to an article he wrote for Amnesty International Monitor shortly after the crash, acknowledging that the air force had in fact monitored the aircraft that night.
- 39 Although the plane entered a military and operational zone (a "special restricted airspace") which was under twenty-four hour radar surveillance by a highly sophisticated Plessey system, no warning was given that the plane was off-course and in South African airspace, nor was preventive action taken. A member of the Mozambican investigating team told the Commission:

*I think it is reasonable to assume that they (the South Africans) saw the flight diverting from its normal path, going towards the crash site. And I also think that it's reasonable to say that they failed all the basic norms and regulations of international aviation. Because they failed to warn the crew about the mistake which was being made.*

## **The South African security forces**

- 40 A large number of South African Special Forces troops converged in the area of Komatipoort/Mbuzini on the night of the crash.
- 41 "Ben" a former MI officer, testified at the section 29 enquiry in Cape Town that he had been based at Skwamans, a secret security police base shared with MI

operatives halfway between Mbuzini and Komatipoort, at the time of the incident. He claims that a number of high-ranking security force officials converged on Skwamans for a meeting and a *braai* the day before the crash. They left late that night in a small plane and some returned after the crash had taken place. In a sworn statement, he provided the names of General Kat Liebenberg, Foreign Minister Pik Botha, General van der Westhuizen of Military Intelligence (MI) and about fifteen others, mostly from Eastern Transvaal Command and Group 33.

- 42 Also present was the Eastern Transvaal MI head, Captain Wayne Lelly, who headed up another secret base, Sub-station 4, which overlooked the mountain where the plane first hit. This base was opened a year before the crash and, according to "Ben", was used by MI to interrogate cadres. "Ben" alleges that some of the operatives went to Sub-station 4 "at the crack of dawn" on the day of the crash. He also forwarded the names of some *askaris* and five reconnaissance force members.
- 43 Captain Lelly now lives in Mozambique and has confirmed his presence on the scene, but claims it was for another operation.
- 44 An independent source confirmed to a Gauteng investigator that Skwamans was closed shortly after the crash. Several other sources confirmed the presence and involvement of Captain Lelly and an MI planning commander.
- 45 Many other security force members confirmed to the Commission that there had been a strong presence of police and military personnel in the area at the time of the incident.

## The wreckage

- 46 The Commission attempted to track down the scattered pieces of wreckage of the plane. It was decided that the Commission would assist the Department of Arts and Culture, Science and Technology in its effort to collect the pieces as part of their planned memorial for Mbuzini.
- 47 The main pieces of wreckage are still at Tonga police station, where they were taken after the investigation. Some pieces found their way to a game farm. The rest of the wreckage is at a scrap yard in Witrivier.

## ■ CONCLUSION

- 48 The investigations conducted by the Commission raised a number of questions, including the possibility of a false beacon and the absence of a warning from the South African authorities. The matter requires further investigation by an appropriate structure.