

SA stole documents

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WHATEVER the cause of the Samora Machel air crash, there is one scandal involving the actions of the South African authorities which has not been fully exposed — relating to Mozambique state documents on board the aircraft.

A little more than a week after the crash a diplomatic row blew up with allegations by South Africa that Mozambique and Zimbabwe had been plotting to overthrow the Banda government.

The claims were based on the minutes of a meeting in Maputo three days before the crash. They recorded a meeting between Machel and the commander in chief of the Zimbabwe armed forces, General Rex Nhongo. The then foreign minister, Pik Botha, said the minutes of the meeting had been found in the aircraft wreckage.

In evidence to the Margo inquiry, a senior official in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, Neil van Heerden, said that when he arrived on the scene of the disaster "things were strewn all over and appeared to be in the original positions in which they landed at the crash".

Subsequently — as Van Heerden related it — a strong wind blew up. A Mozambican Cabinet minister at the scene, Colonel Sergio Viera, had said the scattered documents appeared to be Machel's personal papers and state documents. He had asked Pik Botha if they (the Mozambicans) could remove them before they blew away.

Botha, after consultation with the South

African commissioner of police, had agreed.

Van Heerden went on to say that the commissioner of police had added "that these documents had been photocopied for the purpose of the further investigation and therefore the original documents could be handed back". The point was not explored further by the commission.

This evidence supports an interview carried by the Mozambican news agency, AIM, on October 27 1986 with a survivor of the crash. The survivor complained that police who were first to arrive on the scene ignored the injured and instead concentrated on collecting and taking away documents, including two diplomatic bags.

This action by the police would appear to have been a breach of aviation legislation prohibiting any disturbance of an accident site without permission of an official investigating team.

It also seems to have been a breach of diplomatic immunity which provides for the complete inviolability of a foreign head of state.

A more serious issue is raised, however. The crash took place in a remote area. To have copied the documents the police at the scene would have had to bundle them into a vehicle and drive them to Komatipoort, the nearest town with a photostat machine.

But Van Heerden's insistence that the documents in question were strewn around the ground implies that the police brought them back to the crash site and re-distributed them on the ground — a conspiracy to mislead. It also raises questions as to whether there was any other tampering with the wreckage.



Three years ago President Mandela was on hand for the first time to comfort Graça Machel at the rocky crash site of her late husband, Samora. They returned this year as a couple

PHOTOGRAPH: MARIUS VAN DER WALL, COURTESY BEELD