

New evidence links SADF to Machel air crash

TRC will probe disaster – and Helderberg crash off Mauritius in 1987

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New evidence linking the former South African Defence Force with the aircraft crash that killed Mozambican President Samora Machel in 1986 will be investigated by the Truth Commission at a closed inquiry next month.

Investigators will also question 11 people – including former and present agents of Armscor and its subsidiaries – about the 1987 SAA Helderberg air disaster that claimed 159 lives. This inquiry, set down for three days, also will be behind closed doors.

Commission spokesman Christelle Terreblanche said there was concern for the safety of some of those expected to testify about the Machel crash. They included a former Military Intelligence operative, two other former SADF members and a former Mozambican official. They have not been named by the commission.

“We’re still making an assessment of whether they will feel safe,” said Ms Terreblanche yesterday.

Asked what the possible source of the threat was, she said some of the witnesses had not testified previously.

“They are probably going to implicate people,” she said.

None of the witnesses in either hearing had been formally subpoenaed, but they had been told they would have to provide a proper excuse if they did not appear, said Ms Terreblanche.

Some of those due to appear had volunteered to give evidence while others were “uncovered” during

Truth Commission investigations of the incidents.

The head of the commission’s investigative unit, Dumisa Ntsebeza, said yesterday there was new evidence linking the crash that killed Mr Machel and 33 others with the activities of the former SADF.

The Tupolev aircraft in which Mr Machel was travelling from Malawi to Mozambique crashed at night in South African territory and a 1987 board of inquiry under Mr Justice Cecil Margo concluded that pilot error was responsible.

But Russian experts who helped with the investigation concluded that the aircraft was lured into the mountains near Mbuluzini on the border by a decoy radio beacon, stronger than the beacon at Maputo airport.

The inquiry takes place on June 4.

Judge Margo also headed the inquiry into the crash of the Helderberg, a Boeing 747 passenger-cargo aircraft that crashed into the sea off Mauritius after a fire on board. The inquiry did not make conclusive findings about the cause of the fire.

There have been persistent rumours that the aircraft was carrying materials for Armscor.

Mr Ntsebeza said Friends of the Victims of the Helderberg made a submission to the Truth Commission last year, expressing concern about the Margo inquiry and urging the commission to undertake further investigations.

Those invited to this inquiry included Gert van der Veer, former chief executive of SAA; Mickey Mitchell, former flight operations director at SAA; and SAA former employees Tienie Willemse, John

Hare, Joseph Braizblatt and Vernon Nadel.

David Klatzow, a forensics expert who has been investigating the Helderberg incident for several years, had been invited to give specialist testimony and analysis, said Mr Ntsebeza.

Attorney J N J van Rensburg, the Margo Board of Inquiry’s legal officer, would be asked to explain how evidence had been dealt with by the inquiry.

This inquiry takes place from June 1 to 3.