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# The Mozambican Tupolev Disaster

During the apartheid era, South Africa's government made a habit of funding rebel groups in neighboring countries with governments opposed to the regime. The 1980s communist FRELIMO government of Mozambique found themselves in conflict with their neighbor to the south, and the South Africans had aided the anti-Communist RENAMO with whom the FRELIMO had been fighting a civil war since 1976. In October 1986, the Mozambican president Samora Machel met with his counterparts from Angola, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and Zambia to discuss an Angolan terrorist group allied with South Africa.

On October 19, Machel was heading back to Mozambique in a jet flown by a USSR flight crew loaned to his government. Fifteen minutes before it was due to land at Maputo airport, the plane turned 37 degrees off course. The flight engineer was recorded as saying that the cockpit's VOR, which tracks radio signals from the ground, indicated that was the correct direction. Less than 12 minutes later the plane crashed into the ground, miles off course.

The plane hit mountainous terrains a few hundred meters (about 1,000 feet) into South Africa, killing 34 people including President Machel. The original investigation concluded that errors by the flight crew were to blame, and that they'd programmed their VOR to the wrong ground beacon. Many people remained unconvinced.

In Mozambique, and in South Africa itself, many believe that the apartheid government arranged the murder. Prominent South African ambassador Abdul Minty has said he's convinced "an electronic decoy was utilized to give the pilots false information about the maps and the region." It's a popular suspicion.

The Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) was South Africa's government-sponsored hit squad during the apartheid era. In 2008, a former CCB operative appeared on television and claimed a beacon was used. Hans Louw said he was part of a "back-up team with missiles" on standby to shoot down

the plane if the decoy beacon hadn't done the job. A second anonymous agent confirmed the story. South African authorities adamantly deny that they were responsible for the crash.