

Magic unrealism

ROBERT KIRBY: LOOSE CANNON - Oct 27 2006 00:00

Last week saw the 20th anniversary of the air accident in which Mozambican president Samora Machel lost his life along with some 25 other passengers on a Soviet-built and crewed Tupolev TU-134 aircraft. Few will deny that Machel's death was a grave loss to his country and, in a wider sense, to African politics. What cannot be denied are the extraordinary and often quite bizarre circumstances surrounding investigations into the crash. Also that, with 20 years gone, there remains no closure of the matter. According to an SABC news bulletin, investigations are still underway into the causes of the crash.

Two words are currently very fashionable among our political elite. They trip off tongues eager to display the rare symbiosis of democratic ambition and morality, which are supposed to have marked our first years of liberation. "Dignity" is one, frequently deployed in support is its lexical relative, "respect". The trouble is that, when it comes to the combined fermentation and abetment of short-term objectives, any such fine sentiments are easily elbowed out of the way. No better proof of this can be seen in the way politicians, all of the 20 years on, are still fulminating about the part they believe was played in the Machel crash by "agents of the apartheid regime". What ordinary, what decent human courtesy is owed to Samora Machel's memory has become entirely subordinate to the ever popular diversion of having yet another lightless grovel around the sins of South Africa's past.

When it comes to summoning the cockroaches from behind the wainscoting, there's nothing like a good old conspiracy theory; the wilder the better. The Tupolev crash became connoisseur's grist to that mill. As in the case of the Helderberg Boeing 747 crash of 1987, many were those who sought to capitalise in one way or another on the two tragedies. The spectre of the "apartheid machine" was summoned from its crypt, to stand accused as primary cause in both crashes. Respect and dignity? Not when there's so much political and other feedstock up for engorgement.

Last Thursday, President Thabo Mbeki suffered one of his increasingly frequent bouts of magical unrealism. Speaking on the anniversary of the Tupolev crash, he trotted out vaporous promises about how no one would rest until "the real causes of the shocking Machel accident" were uncovered. Mr Mbeki is fond of fortifying the dignity of his fellows. Yet, how meticulously any dignity about Machel's memory is still being shoved aside, supplanted by the unseemly needs of Mr Mbeki, and others, to poach upon the tragedy.

Let me jog the memory. Investigations into the Machel/Tupolev crash began with a board of enquiry headed by the late Judge Cecil Margo. The board was made up of eight members, to include internationally recognised air accident investigators. As both the aircraft and its crew were Soviet in origin, there was Russian representation on the board.

Held under bright public lights, the Margo board found unanimously that the accident was caused by pilot and crew error -- in fact a very charitable definition of what was in fact negligence of criminal proportions. Hardly had this finding been published than a minority report was issued hastily by the Soviet elements on the board. At this stage, and for the first time, the theory of the "decoy navigational beacon" was introduced. It seemed political pressure was being applied from afar. After all, the aircraft had been a donation to Mozambique, its crew were Russian. There was no way a South African board of enquiry could be allowed to

blame the death of the Mozambiquean president on the Kremlin.

The decoy beacon theory had the desired effect. Conspiracy loonies swarmed to it like flies to a coffin. Summarily, Margo's board was denounced as being a political whitewash, a pathetic cover-up of a clandestine assassination plot. Grim apartheid had struck again. Never mind that the elements of this new theorising would embarrass the corniest of thriller writers.

Next, in a preposterous series of knock-ons, were "special" Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings into both the Machel and Helderberg accidents. Unlike Margo's board, these hearings were held in camera, a wise decision as it turned out. The transcription of the Helderberg TRC hearing has been published. It was a detailed record of what had been a parody of Kafkaesque proportions. The transcript of the Machel component of the secret TRC hearings is still being withheld from the public -- to avoid further embarrassment we must assume. Its findings have, however, been published. They bristle with the absurd: solecism stumbles over supposition, half truth competes with guesswork. The findings are a jot short of being utter nonsense. Any qualified reading of evidence heard by the Margo board shows that its interpretations were the only possible ones: an atrocious lack of airmanship, poor discipline combined with a devil-may-care attitude brought that aircraft to its unnecessary end. No amount of decoy beacon theorising will ever confound that. Any further grave-picking will amount to cynical spoliation.

Transport Minister Jeff Radebe showed both maturity and sensitivity when, a while ago, he declared that any further digging into the Helderberg disaster will not take place. Only two things now remain to be done about the Tupolev accident. Withdraw and destroy the disgraceful TRC parody of both accidents. Then let the dead be at peace.

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