

Missing Helderberg tape may point to SAA[NL][PARA]May 23 2000 at 12:07AM[PARA]Fresh light has been cast on a crucial missing Helderberg audio-tape that contains the last minutes of a conversation between Captain Dawie Uys and Johannesburg International Airport. [NL][NL]The airport operations room tape disappeared on the morning after the accident. If it can be proved that South African Airways removed the tape, it may suggest the airline was aware dangerous chemicals had been on board the Helderberg, and that a mention of the consignment may have been made on the tape. [NL][NL]If proven true, the national carrier could face claims of hundreds of millions of Rand from the families of the 159 victims of the 1987 disaster. [NL][NL]An as yet unpublished record of a conversation between leading private forensic consultant David Klatzow and an SAA pilot, Jimmy Deal, who has since died, shows Deal was instructed to pick up the tape from the airport, and that he handed it over to SAA. [NL][NL]This tape is not to be confused with that of the cockpit voice recorder which was handed to Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) officials last week. [NL][NL]In his findings on the disaster in 1989, Judge Cecil Margo concluded that, although the tape had been either inadvertently recorded over or mislaid, its contents would have had no bearing on the crash. [NL][NL]The aircraft crashed into the sea off Mauritius on November 28 1987, killing everyone on board. [NL][NL]Klatzow said on Monday that Deal had told him he had been instructed to remove the tape, and hand it over to a senior SAA official. He went down to the control room on the night of the crash to get it. Klatzow said he had Deal on tape confessing to this. [NL][NL]When the CAA launched its inquiry into the crash, one of the first things the investigators did was to request the tape from SAA. [NL][NL]According to the chief technical investigator, Rennie van Zyl, he listened to the tape, and it was found to be blank. [NL][NL]Van Zyl approached SAA, who said the tape was "missing" or that it had been re-recorded. The missing tape, and the absence of a plausible reason for its non-existence, also came to the attention of SAA flight engineers, who were doing their own investigation at the same time as the Margo probe. [NL][NL]The Star newspaper has an affidavit made by Yvonne Bellagarda, the wife of flight engineer Joe Bellagarda who was killed in the crash, that Margo warned the engineers to drop their inquiries into the missing tape. [NL][NL]Yvonne said she was friends with Jimmy Mitton, a close friend of her late husband's, who was called in by Judge Margo. [NL][NL]"When Mitton came back to me, he was upset. He told me Margo had insisted that he drop his line of inquiry. Furthermore, Margo had told him that the country cannot afford to have him pursue this line of inquiry. It would cost too much and that his job, career and safety were on the line." [NL][NL]Margo is ill and was unable to speak to the press last night.