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THE TIMES, W

PIPER LANCE DISAPPEARANCE

Inquiry board wants to travel to Tunisia

Plane may not have come down in Tunisian waters

The inquiry set up to investigate the disappearance of a light plane on its way here from Djerba yesterday rapped the authorities for failing to investigate the Tunisian end promptly and thoroughly.

The inquiry now wants to travel to Tunisia to "explore all details in further depth" and to examine "certain important witnesses and collect all relevant data and documentary material."

The board yesterday said it felt this "ought to have been done in the very early stages before the setting up of this investigating tribunal."

The inquiry, chaired by Dr Philip Seabrook with Captain Frank Baumgartner and Engineer Louis Guerdains, feels there was not enough evidence to lead it to the facts surrounding the disappearance of the single-engined Piper Lance plane piloted by Carmel Bartolo and carrying passengers Philip Farrugia, Matthew Aquilina, Mike Williams, Desmond Boomer and Tadous Gerny last December 3.

The inquiry has already requested "further research and investigation (to help it) appreciate fully all the circumstances of this case."

It said it was aware that the authorities were doing their best but not enough had been done to pressure the Tunisian authorities to cooperate fully and comply promptly with requests.

The inquiry's remarks came at the end of yesterday's sitting as

Sharon Spliteri

the last of the victims' relatives took the witness stand.

The parents of Matthew Aquilina, Joseph and Cecilia, took the witness stand to explain the attempts they made to trace their son.

Joseph Aquilina said his son called him on his car phone on December 2 at 8.50 p.m. to ask him to pick him up from the airport at about 9.30 p.m.

He called again at 8 p.m. to say that the flight would be delayed and yet again at about 9.30 p.m. to say that he was planning to stay in a Djerba hotel overnight because the weather conditions were very bad.

The son was due to call him before he left Tunisia but never did.

Joseph Aquilina said he had made many contacts in Tunisia to find out what happened.

He was still checking whether the crew on board a Turkish vessel sailing in the area at the time the flight allegedly left Tunisia had heard or seen anything.

He said the Tunisians had not given him much information but had told him that Bartolo had never picked up the weather report.

He and his wife decided it would be better if she were to go to Tunisia.

Cecilia Aquilina described how she went to Tunisia to obtain infor-

mation and had a meeting with a first secretary at the Tunisian Foreign Ministry.

She asked the official, going by the name of Rasouni, whether the Tunisian authorities would consider continuing with the searches.

She said he told her that they would not because they believed the plane had not come down in Tunisian waters.

Mrs Aquilina also met an official from the Transport Ministry who gave her details about the flight, that it left at 9.45 a.m. but had originally been due to fly at 8 a.m.

She asked to listen to the tape of the conversation between Tunisian air traffic control and the pilot but said the Tunisians did not seem too pleased about it.

She explained that she wanted to see if she could pick out her son's voice in the background or whether she could understand any conversation in Maltese.

But the authorities told her it was not for her to ask for the tape, as an individual, but for the Maltese government.

She was also told that the plane radio was faulty, that it was not working all the time, and that there was an 85 per cent chance that the plane came down in the water.

The mother said she had never managed to find out which hotel her son had stayed at before leav-

ing Tunisia. She had checked with Djerba Palace because she knew he liked to stay there but they had not seen him.

Grace Farrugia told the inquiry her husband Philip had been due a week earlier but had stayed on in Libya to stand in for a fellow worker.

She said she had been expecting him in the afternoon and when her daughter had heard the news that a plane due in early on the morning of December 3 had gone missing she had dismissed it.

But her daughter had later heard her father's name as one of the six missing people and she had called the police.

Mrs Farrugia said she had gone to the airport to meet her husband at 2 p.m. because he had called her four days earlier and given her the time when to expect him.

He had not arrived and she had gone back at 6 p.m. She was used to delays and saw nothing wrong until she heard of the news reports.

Antonia Bartolo, the pilot's wife, and Carmel Boomer, Desmond's father, also took the witness stand yesterday.

The inquiry continues.

Attorney General Dr Anthony Bugeja is counsel for the government; Dr Edgar Micallef for the Department of Civil Aviation; Dr Malcolm Pace for the Bartolo family and Sun Aviation; Dr Jose Herrera for the Farrugia family and Dr Joseph Brincat for the Aquilina family.

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