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Portuguese confident of protecting Zambezi river project from attacks by Frelimo guerrillas

Cabora Bassa dam ahead of schedule

From Michael Knipe
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Five years ago, the late Dr Eduardo Mondlane, leader of Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), told me in an interview: "If we do not destroy the Cabora Bassa dam scheme, or at least make it twice as costly, we shall have received our greatest setback."

At this dusty town, the supply base for the dam project, and at the dam site itself 80 miles farther up the Zambezi river, Portuguese officials assured me that construction is ahead of schedule.

A labyrinth of enormous tunnels have been carved through the mountainsides and by the end of this year the dam wall will straddle the gorge, 500ft high and 1,000ft long. Then, in July next year, the river will begin to swell into a 2,700-square kilometre lake. The cost may have increased but this, the Portuguese say, is due more to economic inflation than the efforts of the Frelimo guerrillas.

The fact remains that Frelimo has concentrated its efforts increasingly on the Tete district, and the Portuguese military authorities acknowledge that they have done so with some effect, particularly during the past 12 months. This is marked by the announcement that the size of the Portuguese Army in

Mozambique is being increased by 10,000 men to 60,000.

Tete is the Army's major headache, with an estimated 2,500 guerrillas operating in the district with the support of some 30,000 local Africans.

In the most substantial action in Tete so far, Portuguese troops killed 98 Frelimo rebels approaching the town and another 51 near the dam itself, as recently as December, according to a terse military communiqué.

In March, a 250-strong guerrilla force unsuccessfully attacked the border village of Gago Coutinho in what was seen as an attempt to win a propaganda victory to impress the recent anti-apartheid conference in Oslo.

The prospect of further large-scale activity is not discounted, although a strong military cordon around the dam area is confidently expected to be able to repulse any attacks.

Military officials contend that in the other two contested districts of Mozambique, Niassa and Cabo Delgado, guerrilla action is diminishing because the local population is disillusioned and tired of the conflict.

In the Niassa district it is estimated that there are fewer than 1,000 guerrillas supported by about 6,000 of the popula-

tion. In Cabo Delgado, where the guerrilla war began among the Makonde people nine years ago, there are still believed to be 3,500 active guerrillas supported by 80,000 Makonde. According to the Army, however, only one-quarter of each district is subject to guerrilla action.

"We don't consider they have control over any area", one senior officer said. "We base this on the fact that a 30-strong unit can go anywhere. Frelimo call any area where they can establish a camp a liberated area, even if they need to move frequently."

About 50 per cent of the Frelimo action now takes place in the Tete district, the protrusion of land which is surrounded on three sides by Malawi, Zambia and Rhodesia. The Army admits that here the local Africans "have not yet had time to become aware of the Frelimo lies".

Meanwhile, according to the military authorities, Frelimo relies heavily on "selective terrorism"—attacks on local tribal leaders—to maintain its support. Its action against the Portuguese military forces is restricted largely to laying mines and sporadic ambush exercises.

The Portuguese rate the number of their soldiers killed at an

average of 18 a month which is about twice the figure they gave in 1968. They emphasize, however, that the casualty rate is 0.4 per cent killed and 0.6 per cent severely injured.

For its part, the Army continues to devote considerable effort to what it calls psychological action. Last year 2,285 hours were logged by aircraft flying "sky-shouting" patrols in which recorded propaganda messages were relayed to the Africans living in the bush and some five million pamphlets were dropped.

The military officials predict that they will have gained the upper hand in the troublesome Tete district in 18 months' time. This is based not so much on their own military prowess as on the fact that by then the Cabora Bassa lake will be rising and extending westward 150 miles to Zumbo on the border, effectively cutting across the main area of infiltration from Zambia. At that stage also the economic benefits of the dam project will be coming to fruition.

"This type of war cannot be won militarily", a senior officer acknowledged. "All the Army can do is win enough time for the economic, educational and social developments to begin to work."