

MOZAMBIQUE

# Oil blast boosts the resistance

By José Ramalho



In the early hours of Friday March 23, Beira was rocked by shattering explosions in the port area. Soon huge columns of fire rising 50 m from the Munhava oil tank farm could be seen from as far away as Mafamisse, some 30 km distant.

With the blaze raging uncontrollably, a six-man team of South African fire-fighting engineers and 20 tons of sophisticated equipment were flown to the site. The South Africans, who reportedly put to the test "a technique they had only been theorising about", extinguished the fire in fewer than 30 minutes.

Back in Cape Town, the leader of the team, Rodney Camp, told the Afrikaans-language daily *Beeld* that a Mozambique government official ordered him to sign a document blaming the Rhodesians for the fire. "I wrote something on the paper as I did not want to get my team in trouble," he said.

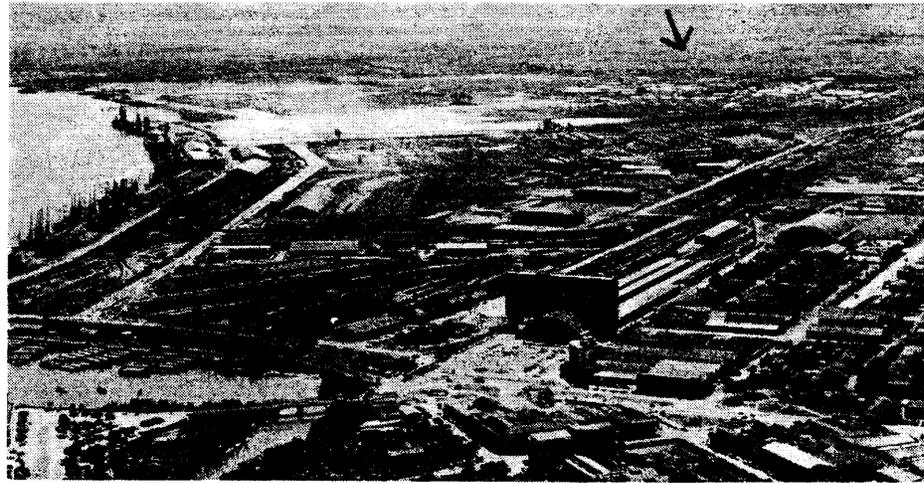
But Camp's opinion differed from the statement he had been forced to make. He was quoted as saying: "It was evident the attack on the oil depot came from within the country. When you are dealing with a different kind of fire — caused by terrorists — you have to develop new methods."

Indeed, he knew what he was talking about after his team's experience of putting out a similar blaze in Salisbury started by Rhodesian terrorists on December 10 last year.

The anti-Frelimo guerrilla movement Resistência Nacional Mocambicana (RNM) claimed responsibility for the attack. The Maputo government was hard put to deny RNM's claims, especially after its own admission, early in January, that the movement had conducted a number of highly successful operations in the four central provinces of the country — Tete, Manica, Sofala and Gaza (TO THE POINT January 19 1979).

An RNM communiqué broadcast last week by the movement's radio station Voz da África Livre (The Voice of Free Africa) said: "A special assault force of the RNM entered the city of Beira and attacked the fuel complex situated in Munhava. The operation took half an hour and 18 tanks were destroyed as well as a high tension post that resulted in Beira's electricity supply being cut."

RNM's claims were supported by reports from the South African fire-fighting team. It said that the explosions started at the state-owned Petromoc tanks. In the chaos that followed 23 holes were punched by Frelimo soldiers' fire in the Mobil, Caltex and Shell tanks. Four of Mobil's 16 tanks were hit of which



Beira docks: oil installations (arrow indicates position)

three caught fire on Friday evening. A Shell tank erupted into flames and, at Caltex, petrol was siphoned out of damaged tanks.

Mozambique's minister of energy ordered the South African fire-fighting team to concentrate its efforts on the state-owned Petromoc tanks but, according to the team's leader, "nothing could be saved because all the tanks had collapsed".

Military experts dismissed any possibility of the daring raid having been carried out by Rhodesians. Their assessment is based on the fact that the port of Beira is more than 300 km away from the Rhodesian border and it is doubtful whether a foreign strike force could have made a round trip, presumably on foot, through densely populated areas without being detected.

Also the short time taken by the attackers to plant the explosives and to set them off leads to the belief that they were familiar with the site and knew exactly how to get in and out of a heavily guarded area.

This assumption is backed by RNM sources who claim that the attack was led by guerrillas who previously worked at the Munhava fuel depot.

The weight of evidence on the Beira blaze definitely put the RNM on the map as a real threat to President Samora Machel's Marxist regime.

Observers who so far had been sceptical about the movement's existence and strength have started to take notice. They were helped by the release last week of a booklet *Estatutos*, outlining the RNM's history, ideology, aims and composition.

*Estatutos* says the movement was born at a meeting on November 21 1976 of Frelimo army commanders opposed to Machel's communist regime which "goes against the political programme" laid down by the late president Eduardo Mondlane (Frelimo's founder and first president killed in Dar es Salaam by a bomb explosion in February 1969).

The RNM pledges "to fight with all means available to put an end to Soviet imperialist domination in Mozambique", and offers its support to the people of other African countries in their struggle against "the oppressive and enslaving communist system" — especially the Portuguese-speaking countries.

The aims of the movement are spelt out in a 24-point manifesto directed towards the setting

up in Mozambique of a Western-style multi-party democracy, based on full and free elections.

Detractors of the anti-Frelimo movement claim it receives substantial aid from the Rhodesian government. Were it so, the RNM could hardly be accused of being the only "liberation movement" to accept assistance from a foreign country.

Indeed, the difference is that if it were supported by the communist bloc, the RNM would by now have been recognised by a large number of "progressive countries" and might even have gained observer status in the United Nations.