

MOZAMBIQUE

New Statesman

Lifelines 29/1/81

under attack

DAVID WARD reports on South Africa's apparent intervention in the front-line states

LAST WEEK marker buoys leading to the Mozambican port of Beira were blown up causing the temporary closure of the port's main harbour. Two weeks earlier road and rail bridges near Beira were destroyed breaking the crucial transport link to Zimbabwe's border at Umtali. These events, although less spectacular than the recent South African invasion of Angola, are further examples of Pretoria's 'total onslaught' against Southern Africa's front-line states.

The bombings were not carried out directly by the South African Defence Force but by a group called the Mozambique Resistance Movement (MRM). The

South African strategy is to create a climate of economic and political disruption through use of a surrogate sabotage force, a tactic that is already familiar in Angola. Just as Jonas Savimbi's South African-backed UNITA is attempting to undermine the Angolan government in Luanda, the MRM is seeking to discredit FRELIMO in Mozambique. In both cases the South Africans deny any involvement.

The authorities in Mozambique responded to the attacks by accusing the South Africans of intervention. A military spokesman in Pretoria commented: 'Mozambique should learn to deal with its own problems. If they cannot handle the Resistance Movement they shouldn't blame us.' Evidence is mounting, however, that the MRM was created and is supported entirely by the South Africans. The FRELIMO government has recorded over 40 South African violations of Mozambican airspace in the last 18 months. The main aim of these flights is to drop supplies to the MRM. FRELIMO troops have also discovered quantities of ammunition, used by the MRM, labelled in English and Afrikaans.

THE MRM's background lends weight to Mozambique's accusations. The 'movement' appears to have been formed by the combined involvement of ex-colonial Portuguese (such as businessman Jorge Jardim, who formerly owned a newspaper in pre-independence Mozambique); remnants of

the colonial armed forces; and even Malawi's President, the pro-South African Hastings Banda. Its first military activities began during the conflict in the late Seventies between the Smith/Muzorewa regime and the Patriotic Front alliance inside Zimbabwe. The MRM was given a training base near Umtali and broadcasting facilities for a radio station, moved into South Africa which directed fiercely anti-FRELIMO propaganda towards Mozambique. At the time, the MRM was controlled entirely by the Rhodesian security forces, and it is rumoured that an MRM representative accompanied Bishop Muzorewa's delegation to the Lancaster House conference in September 1979.

Following Zimbabwe's independence, the entire MRM operation, including the radio station, moved into South Africa and is now based at Gazanculo in the northern Transvaal, close to the Mozambique border. The governments of both Zimbabwe and Mozambique claim to have precise details of the MRM base, where a large number of Bishop Muzorewa's former followers are reportedly being trained by the South Africans alongside the MRM.

The Zimbabwe and Mozambique governments have agreed a joint military strategy to counteract the activities of the MRM, but the problem seems to be escalating. Since January it is estimated that more than 500 people have been killed in the conflict, including 200 MRM guerrillas

and 80 Mozambican soldiers. In particular MRM violence and tactics are playing havoc with the Mozambique government's village-based strategy. The communal villages in remote rural provinces of central Mozambique are favourite guerrilla targets and Zimbabwe is facing a minor refugee crisis as peasants flee from the MRM across the border. The total number of displaced persons in Zimbabwe is now over 3,000 and increasing at a rate of 25 per day. There is a real danger of the fighting spreading inside Zimbabwe's borders. According to local officials some of the people crossing into Zimbabwe as refugees are MRM guerrillas who take advantage of the free movement across the border. One ZANU-PF MP representing the border area has called for urgent aid. 'There is still a war going on and we need the help and protection of the government', he says.

At present, the scale of guerrilla operations is achieving exactly the kind of political and economic destabilisation that Pretoria desires. The recent bridge damage is a good example. Although the bombing took place in Mozambique, the greatest impact will be felt in Zimbabwe. The explosions damaged the Beira-Umtali oil pipeline, which has been closed since UDI in 1965 but was scheduled to reopen this December. It now seems likely that the reopening will be delayed, forcing Zimbabwe into an extended reliance on South African oil supplies. Also held up is Zimbabwe's maize surplus, which was being exported through a World Food Programme project to neighbouring African states that are not self-sufficient in food. If Zimbabwe's crop cannot be distributed the importing countries will have no alternative but to buy maize from South Africa.

THE TACTIC employed by South Africa, through the MRM, is not simply to destroy the government of Mozambique. In fact the MRM, unlike UNITA in Angola, has no leader of the stature of Savimbi who could potentially be offered as an alternative to President Samora Machel. It is sufficient constantly to harass as many of the front-line states as possible, making economic development impossible and support for the South African liberation movements a greater sacrifice. This reasoning explains the significance of the MRM attacks on Beira, for the port is central to the attempts by the Southern African states to disengage economically from South Africa.

Last year the front-line states established the SADCC* (Southern Africa Development Co-ordination Conference), an economic bloc of the region's nine independent states whose first priority is improving the transport routes that link Mozambique's Indian Ocean ports to her landlocked neighbours, Zimbabwe and Zambia. The SADCC initiative is a severe blow to South Africa's attempts to force its weaker neighbours in Southern Africa into economic dependence on Pretoria. But as the Beira bombings illustrate, the South Africans have no intention of letting that initiative go unchallenged. □

*More details of the SADCC and South Africa's actions against the front-line states are available in *The Struggle for Southern Africa* by Plaut/Unterhalter & Ward, published by War on Want/Liberation at 95p.