

Now there's method in MRM attacks

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In past years the Mozambique Resistance Movement appeared to think no further than harassing Samora Machel's government. But recent sabotage attacks seem to point to a pattern in their activities, reports MICHAEL HOLMAN

"ELVIS" is coming to Beira's Novo Cine where, in the didactic style of Mozambique's Marxist government, a foyer notice exhorts patrons to appreciate that "the cinema is one of the media which contribute to cultural formation".

The 500-seat cinema, with its plush red fittings, is the most popular entertainment in a port which was once a thriving holiday resort for white Rhodesians.

The tourists from independent Zimbabwe have yet to return, although a few businessmen are cautiously moving back. But Beira's efforts to return to normality two years after the end of the war in Zimbabwe have been frustrated by continuing conflict.

Mozambique's second largest

city is still in the frontline. On the one hand, its port, road and rail links are vital elements in the struggle by the nine black states of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) to reduce their trade and transport dependence on South Africa.

On the other, it is the target of continuing sabotage operations by a group of Mozambican dissidents who have succeeded in causing widespread disruption throughout the central provinces of the country.

The so-called Mozambique Resistance Movement (MRM), which the Mozambique government believes is receiving training and support from South Africa, has succeeded in aggravating the economic chaos which followed independence in 1975, with attacks on power lines, transport links and harbour installations.

Beira never recovered from the post-independence exodus of Portuguese settlers, taking with them their cars, household effects and their skills. The closure of the Rhodesian border in 1976 was a further blow for Beira, whose port and railways are the main reason for existence.

Vital

Shops are either closed or sparsely stocked, without basic commodities such as cooking oil and sugar.

Yet Beira and its railway, along with Mozambique's two other major trade routes through Maputo and Nacala, play a vital role in the SADCC's strategy.

The stakes are high. If SADCC succeeds in its aim — albeit only a long-term prospect — it would remove a powerful weapon from South Africa in resisting African

pressure to change its racial policies. If it fails, then South Africa can dictate its own terms.

Mozambique officials are convinced they are already paying the price for such a strategic position, through the sabotage of the MRM.

The movement is made up of former black members of the Portuguese armed forces in Mozambique, who switched places with the victorious Frelimo guerrillas at independence in 1975 and who took to the bush.

Originally given support and supplies by the white Rhodesian forces of Mr Ian Smith, there is little doubt that it now receives succour from South Africa.

At first the MRM appeared to have no clear purpose other than to harass the government of Mr Samora Machel. But recent events suggest a strategy which could have profound implications for SADCC and the region.

On October 29, Beira's transport links with Zimbabwe were cut when the vital Pungwe road and rail bridges, 60kms from the port, were sabotaged, allegedly by the MRM. The oil pipeline from Beira to Umtali, now being repaired, runs under the bridges and was also damaged. Two weeks later, limpet mines destroyed ten buoys marking the channel to Beira Port.

The attack on the bridges also cut Beira's link with Maputo. The rail line is scheduled to reopen this week, but the road bridge is so badly damaged that it is likely to be several months before it can be re-opened, although a limited ferry service is now operating. Less serious was the sabotage of the buoys.

"Despite the attack, port traffic never stopped," says Mr Rui Fonseca, director of the port.

"The buoys were replaced from stocks within 48 hours."

Nevertheless, the port is going through a thin time. Poor weather has affected agricultural output in the region and traffic last year dropped to a 10-year low of 1.5-million tons from 4.2-million tons a year in 1972.

If, as Mozambican officials believe, South Africa is behind attempts to damage the port, why are six locomotives from the Republic working on the mountainous stretch of the railway line between Umtali and Beira?

Malawi

"They have it both ways," replies Dr Carlos Veloso, deputy director of Mozambique Railways' central region. "We pay them for the locomotives in precious foreign exchange while they sabotage the port that earns us that foreign exchange."

What may not be clear, however, is the position of Malawi. Dr Hastings Banda, President of Malawi, the only African leader to maintain diplomatic links with South Africa, has been cool — if not hostile — to liberation movements and shows no sign of reducing trade or diplomatic links with Pretoria.

Yet 10 of Malawi's 14 tank cars of fuel a day go through Beira (the rest go through Nacala) and the port handles much of Malawi's agricultural exports.

But Mozambican officials point out that the Pungwe sabotage did not affect the Malawi railway link, which branches north before the bridge, and that the line has been untouched by the MRM. The railway to Nacala, as well as the port itself, has also been left alone.

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