

MNR STILL ACTIVE DESPITE PEACE TALKS

IN THE last two weeks of January a vicious attack by the Mozambique National Resistance movement (MNR) on a bus and the flooding caused by a cyclone once again drew world attention. The MNR attack, the first to grab the headlines for some months, reminded people that the Frelimo government is still having to cope with the South African inspired and backed insurgency campaign. The cyclone demonstrated once more the vulnerability of African states to sudden climatic changes (coming as it did on the heels of a devastating drought).

Twenty seven people were killed and at least another 20 wounded when the rebels, known as kizumba (hyena) by the Mozambicans, attacked an express bus travelling on the route from Inhambane to Maputo. Two groups of guerrillas were said to have attacked the vehicle and then to have killed survivors.

The attack came as quite a shock as over the past four or five months government forces had been achieving successes against the depredations of the insurgents. A campaign had been in progress since March 1983 to clear Mozambique's provinces of the bases and sabotage groups of the MNR. At a news conference on December 27 the Chief of the General Staff of the Mozambique Armed Forces, Lt-Gen Sebastio Mabote, gave details of the offensive and painted an optimistic picture of the success of anti-insurgency campaigns.

He said that over 3,000 "armed bandits" had been captured and a large number of bases destroyed, including the major logistical base of Tome in Inhambane province. The proof of the successes was the normal flow of traffic on strategic railways and roads which in the past had been frequently cut by rebel attacks.

During the news conference, Mabote provided details of the role played by South Africa in supporting the MNR (the main aim of the Mozambicans in taking part in the recent talks with Pretoria was to end South African support for the movement). The Chief of Staff disclosed that Pretoria used parachute drops to keep the guerrillas supplied and that these generally took place at night. Aircraft flew from Ponta do Ouro, Moamba or Pafuri. South Africa also manufactured AK rifles of the sort supplied by the Soviet Union and Cuba to Mozambique. The fake AKs were supplied to the MNR to create confusion by making Mozambicans think that the USSR and its allies were also supplying the rebels.

Further proof of the South African activities came with the capture of an MNR cadre. He told the Mozambique Information Agency that he had met members of the crew of a South African submarine at a base in Inhambane

province. The submarine was used to ferry supplies and trained fighters to areas of insurgent activity.

As if in answer to Mabote's account of successes against the MNR, the movement's extolling the successes of the movement in 1983. His claims, though, were exaggerated and he did not provide details of any major advances.

A few days later his speech, in the first week of January, the MNR's radio broadcast a number of claims of sabotage actions against roads and railways in southern and central Mozambique. These included cutting the Beira-Malawi railway and part of the Nacala-Malawi line, yet in mid-January Malawi announced that the temporary restrictions on fuel sales at weekends had been lifted – thus demonstrating that fuel import routes were obviously still in operation.

Whether or not one can believe the MNR accounts of their activity, the Maputo authorities are taking no chances. They have brought a number of former guerrilla leaders back into the leading echelons of the armed forces and Western journalists who have seen the army in action say that the units are looking increasingly effective and confident.

In the third week of January the President's office announced that a number of new appointments had been made to "strengthen the leadership of the central bodies of the Ministry of Defence." Among those appointed was Col. Sergio Vieira who was made Deputy Minister of Defence.

Mozambique's other fight is against drought. Inhambane and Gaza provinces have been very badly hit and hundreds of thousands face starvation. Donations of food and money have been coming in from sources as diverse as the USSR, the USA, Sweden and Zaire. The Mozambican Department for the Prevention and Combatting of Natural Disasters has been at full stretch dealing with the drought. Relief operations have been hampered by rebel attacks.

At the end of January a new problem arose – that of cyclone damage. Cyclone Demoina has hit a number of areas in Maputo province and is thought to have caused serious damage in Gaza and Inhambane. The danger is that roads and other communications links will have been swept away and that once the cyclone passes on the work of drought relief will be made that much harder. Flash floods could also have washed away the parched top soil in those areas.

Foreign aid and an end to hostilities are now more vital than ever if Mozambique is to recover from the double blow of drought and the cyclone which caused considerable loss of life in some parts.

Keith Somerville