

On Parade

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A Defence Review

15-10-86

Samora the survivor under siege



IS the regime of that perennial survivor, President Samora Machel, on its knees at last?

That is the burning question as South Africa's daily press carries one report after the other of the Renamo insurgents' advance on Maputo.

However, things should be seen in proportion. Renamo simply does not have the capability to overthrow President Machel by conventional means and somehow I cannot see South Africa sending in an expeditionary force to supply those means, in spite of what the front-line states have been saying.

Which is not to say that a collapse scenario does not exist. President Machel is a wily bird, but like all of us, he has his limitations.

In my opinion the crucial factor is not necessarily ground taken or losses inflicted, but the fighting spirit of Fam (the Mozambican armed forces).

President Machel will survive for precisely as long as his soldiers are willing to fight. So the question is really whether the Frelimo government is about to succumb to what one might call the "Portuguese disease".

One recalls what happened in Angola in 1974. At that stage the three insurgent movements, the MPLA, the FNLA and Unita, had lost the military stage of the conflict and were penned up in three small areas. Another year of operations would have seen them smashed altogether.

What saved them was the fact that Portugal, spiritually and financially exhausted by the long counter-insurgency campaign, collapsed from within.

The government was overthrown and for a brief period its successor was heavily influenced by communists and left wing socialists in and outside the armed forces.



Samora Machel

The immediate result was that all anti-"progressive" elements were disarmed and otherwise hamstrung, so that in effect the colony was handed on a plate to the red-lining MPLA.

A war it cannot win

Now, it is possible that something similar might happen in Mozambique and it could happen at either high or low level, or both.

Much depends on perceptions -- specifically whether Fam regards itself as being caught up in a war it cannot possibly win.

If it does, the following scenario might have some validity:

● Fam's soldiers will lose all their fighting spirit and either merge into the local population or cross over and join Renamo.

This is a distinct possibility, given the fact that the morale of the Mozambican soldiers -- ill-paid, ill-trained, badly motivated -- is known to be very low and getting even lower.

● The Mozambican generals, aware of their fast-crumbing assets and mindful of their limited future under the present dispensation, will overthrow President Machel, put in someone else and negotiate with Renamo.

There has been some talk of a Frelimo-Renamo coalition, but it seems likely that if this happens there will have to be a new face at the helm first; too much blood has been shed and too many hard words spoken.

If President Machel was replaced, however, the new man might be able to negotiate without too great a loss of face on Frelimo's part.

Three questions with mighty implications arise at this stage.

Question No 1: Would the Russians intervene to save Frelimo's bacon?

Frankly, I wonder if they would be willing to embroil themselves in yet another third-world war. Likely they would be satisfied with a non-aligned, non-Frelimo government, as long as they retained the facilities they regard as necessary to secure their only all-year-round maritime route from west to east.

A coalition with Renamo as the major partner would therefore probably be acceptable, since the movement has already stated it would adopt a neutral Mozambique-first stance if it were to come to power.

Question No 2: What would happen to the African National Congress (ANC) if a Renamo-dominated regime came to power?

The ANC would be in the embarrassing position of having backed the wrong horse; and the new regime would be very keen to obtain South African investment and export traffic to resuscitate an economy which is effectively dead.

To be blunt, Mozambique would be largely a South African economic vassal.

In this case, a *de facto* clampdown on ANC activities can be expected.

Question No 3: What would this mean to "front-line" sanctions actions?

Great problems, since their only alternative import-export routes would be through a country with no alternative but to be friendly with South Africa.