



In Harare, talk of a second Vietnam

HOWARD BARRELL reports from Harare

ZIMBABWEANS believe the country has reached a dangerous crossroads in its relations with South Africa.

Some observers in Harare see an inevitable drift towards more generalised war in the subcontinent, which could grow to resemble Indochina at the time of the Vietnam war.

What decisions emerge in Zimbabwe in response to the latest serious deterioration in the situation in the region will likely apply for the remaining five Frontline states, given Zimbabwe's *de facto* political, economic and military leadership of the group.

Rhetorically, Zimbabwe has chosen war — or, more accurately stated, to fight back.

It has dismissed with contempt the declaration of war upon it by the Mozambique resistance movement (Renamo), and has stated its intention to fight to the last person, if necessary, to protect the Frelimo government in Mozambique. The thinking, stated by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe even before the strong emotions evoked by Samora Machel's death, is that Zimbabwe's sovereignty depends on Frelimo's survival in government.

The reasoning is clear: Zimbabwe's political independence relies upon its ability to develop economic independence of South Africa; and that economic independence relies on the maintenance and upgrading of the crucial Mutare-Beira trade corridor through Mozambique. Renamo is seen as the well-clawed cat's paw of Pretoria's attempts to prevent this.

Behind this option lies an increasingly prevalent conclusion: that there can be no peace anywhere in southern Africa — in South Africa itself, or in the Frontline states — until the apartheid government has been replaced. If this conclusion is



Above: Soldiers pay their final tribute before a portrait of Machel during Tuesday's funeral march. Top: the ANC's Oliver Tambo comforts Frelimo's Joaquim Chissano

worked through logically, it could imply more latitude being given by the Frontline states to the African National Congress and others seeking the downfall of apartheid.

But there are voices within Mugabe's ruling Zanu (PF) party who believe that Zimbabwe cannot survive a showdown with South Africa.

They consider that the more sensible course would be for Zimbabwe to attempt to "steal South Africa's show" through a negotiated political solution to the Mozambican conflict. By this is meant Zimbabwe should attempt to bring Renamo and its leadership under its negotiating aegis, and act as peace broker between it and Frelimo.

The prospects for this option — as opposed to a fight to the death — do not look good. Mugabe's own declaration of war on Renamo at a rally of some 40 000 people in Harare on Sunday will inspire no confidence in Renamo about a mediating role for Zimbabwe.

Secondly, Mugabe and Machel had a warm personal relationship of a kind where Mugabe could perhaps have twisted the Mozambican leader into

such a compromise, had Mugabe ever considered this necessary. There is no knowing if a similar relationship will exist with Machel's successor.

And thirdly, South Africa is unlikely to let go of its trump card in the current crisis — Renamo.

Wednesday's Frontline state summit in Maputo declared in its communiqué that the war against Renamo would "continue more vigorously than before". This suggests, though not yet conclusively, that Zimbabwe and the other Frontline states see no prospect that they or the major Western powers can or will restrain the Pretoria government by political and diplomatic means.

"There are a lot of dark clouds about," said one Western diplomat in Harare yesterday.

Reliable estimates of Zimbabwean troop deployments in Mozambique vary between 5 000 and 6 000, although other reports say the number is much higher. They are deployed mainly guarding the Mutare-Beira corridor, but have also been involved in search and destroy operations against Renamo. The eastern border

region with Mozambique has several Zimbabwean troop concentrations along its 800km length, and these could well be stepped up in the light of Renamo's latest threats, which the Frontline states view as merely an echo of its "master's voice" in Pretoria's Directorate of Military Intelligence.

In the worsening regional crisis, Mugabe and other political leaders in Zimbabwe have also become keenly aware of the necessity to build an all-embracing political unity in the country. Home affairs minister Enos Nkala announced this week that Zapu detainees, presumably including former Zapu intelligence chief Dumiso Dabengwa, would soon be released to take part in unity talks with the Zanu (PF) party.

One or two formerly disgraced leaders of the ruling party are also in the process of being slowly rehabilitated back into political life. The Zanu(PF)-Zapu unity talks, though still shrouded in secrecy, continue to promise a successful conclusion, say party sources.

Pictures: Wendy Schweigmann, Reuter, and Guy Tillim. Afrapix