

Rebels in Mozambique aim to split country

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MOCUBA, Mozambique — Large areas of northern Mozambique have become "no-go" areas for government forces, as right-wing rebels press a new offensive that is reported to be aimed at cutting this strategic southern African state in two.

Mozambican military sources suggest that the rebels of the National Resistance — commonly known as RENAMO but referred to in government statements only as "armed bandits" — may be aiming to hold a strategic corridor along the Zambezi river.

The sources say this would allow them to cut Mozambique in two from the southern border of Malawi to the Indian Ocean port of Chinde, through which they could then be supplied by sea by their South African backers.

RENAMO has been reported to be supported by South Africa. Rebel leader Afonso Dhlakama for the first time denied such reports in a statement last weekend.

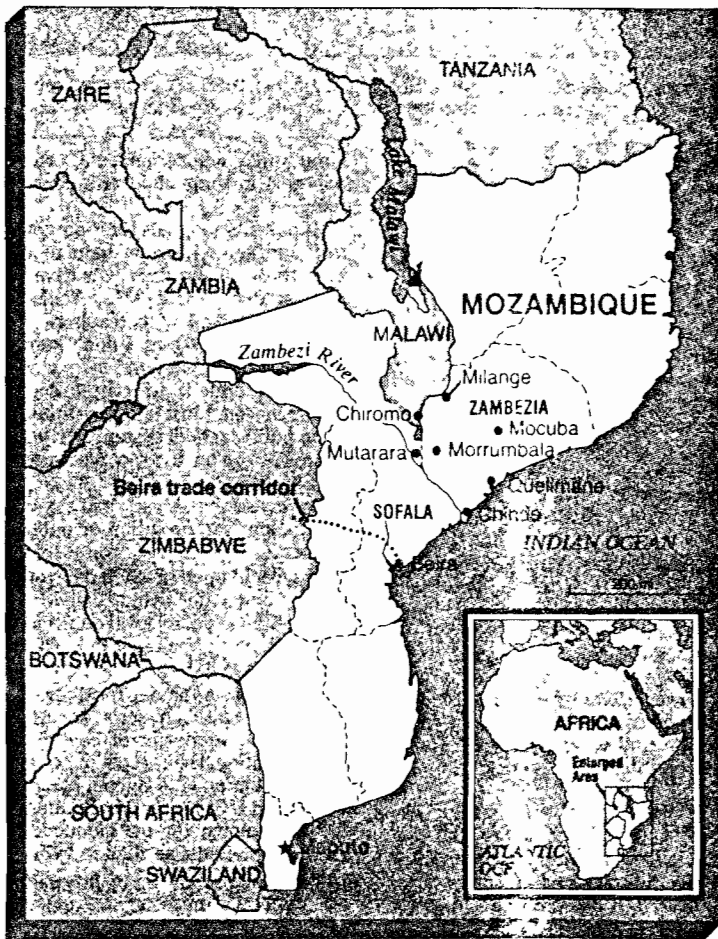
The rebels, who appear to have changed their former hit-and-run strategy into one of holding onto towns and villages, control hundreds of miles of territory in this north-central province of Zambezia, through which the Zambezi flows.

The town of Mocuba, where Mozambique's Zambezia military headquarters are located, is set in a bend of the Lugela River on a vast scrub Savannah.

Contact with the outside world is possible only by radio or biweekly armed convoys, which are invariably attacked on the 90-mile trip to the Indian Ocean port of Quelimane.

Although the rebels do not control the whole province, they have occupied several of its larger towns, especially along the border with Malawi. The Mozambican authorities have accused Malawi of giving support to RENAMO.

There has been no communica-



Map by Dolores Molichka The Washington Times

tion with the towns of Milange, Chiroimo, Morrumbala and Mutarara since early this year.

The north-central province is a devastating example of the effectiveness of the strategy of "destabilization" — which the government here accuses neighboring South Africa of orchestrating through RENAMO.

Mocuba's security chief, and a district administration official, insisted that the situation in the area

was normal, despite a fresh report of an attack by more than 250 guerrillas just 7 miles out of the town along the rundown road to Quelimane.

Three months ago, in a development symptomatic of the guerrilla's increasing clout, RENAMO people in Lisbon contacted Red Cross officials in Geneva in a bid to airlift two dozen prisoners, including expatriate workers, out of Zambezia.

According to a pilot involved in

the proposed arrangement, the group was to have been picked up by night in two small planes from a point along the Zambezi river.

However in August, four days before the Non-Aligned Movement summit started in neighboring Zimbabwe, the agreement was canceled because of government fears that it would confer an aura of legitimacy on the rebels.

More than 600 miles to the south in Maputo, officials privately admit they are apprehensive at the scale of the RENAMO offensive in the north.

And in Beira, a strategic port to the south of Zambezia in Sofala province, a hospital administrator said that only five of Sofala's 12 districts were not seriously affected by rebel activity.

He said that more than 60 percent of his staff had relatives who had been killed or maimed by the rebels.

Throughout the country, some 4 million people are estimated to be facing famine because of the fighting and the recent drought.

Non-governmental organizations such as relief groups say it is difficult to be sure if some remote villages even exist any more.

Mocuba's old colonial center is largely deserted and crumbling, but huge "townships" of makeshift grass huts have sprung up on its outskirts as an estimated 50,000 refugees have flooded in from the north.

All bigger towns report large increases in population. Beira's population has soared by 50,000 to 350,000 in the past two years, putting pressure on housing, food and health facilities.

Although there is no drought in Zambezia province, there is widespread malnutrition, because local farming has been disrupted by the fighting.

Some workers in Mocuba watch apprehensively as small-scale attacks occur closer and closer to the town.

Early this month, RENAMO said that Mocuba was next on its list of towns to be occupied.