

MNR murder brings fresh peace hopes

LISBON. When the bullet-riddled body of Evo Fernandes, effective quartermaster general and strategist of the South African-backed MNR rebel movement in Mozambique, was found by a Lisbon roadside last week, it caused convulsions throughout the already badly shaken MNR leadership. It also brings closer the prospect of a disintegration of the rebel movement and eventual peace in Mozambique.

Never very strong on leadership, the top ranks of the MNR have been considerably thinned out by internecine feuding, with seven notable murders in the past five years. Fernandes was regarded as perhaps the most influential of the remaining hierarchy. A Portuguese-trained lawyer of Goan extraction, his various, often murky, business deals and penchant for creaming off very large 'commissions' from money intended for the MNR had made him a host of enemies. He had earned the special enmity of the Soviet Union when he accepted a large payment for the safe release of Soviet geologists captured in Mozambique by the MNR. Several of the geologists died in captivity, but the money was never returned. 'If you are looking for a motive, everybody had one', notes a senior security official. Yet the final straw which brought about the brutal demise of Fernandes was political.

Ever the opportunist, he had, since the start of this year, been laying plans for double-crossing his South African masters. When he visited the MNR military leader Afonso Dhlakama in Mozambique in January, it is believed he outlined a strategy for its coming to terms with the Frelimo government. The pressure for a settlement was growing, not only from the United States and Mozambique's European trading partners, but also from leading transnational companies such as Entrepoto and Lonrho which have large investments in Mozambique.

But the South Africans were totally opposed to any settlement. In talks with South African military intelligence officials, probably at the high security 'conference centre' at Klapperkop, south east

FERNANDES: 'Everybody had a motive'

of Pretoria, Fernandes was told that there would be no deals. He was also reminded forcefully that Pretoria, as the paymaster, would continue to call the tune. It was Pretoria that had funded the MNR, the largest single contribution being R5m, only half of which had been passed on to its intended beneficiaries.

Fernandes was being called to heel. At the same time, he was under pressure from nationalistic elements of the MNR, headed by Dhlakama, to start distancing the MNR from Pretoria. He was also very strongly aware that the so-called US faction of the MNR, headed by Luis B. Serapiao and Francisco Nota Moises, was discussing ways of removing him in order to pave the way for negotiations. This faction has powerful backing from sources close to the US administration, as well as right-wing interests such as the Heritage Foundation and from businessmen such as James Blanchard III.

The defection to Mozambique on 14 March of the MNR's European spokesman, Paulo Oliveira, increased the internal tensions. These had been exacerbated when pro-South African hardliners in West Germany, including MNR representative, Horacio Leven, and the Heidelberg-based 'foreign relations secretary', Artur Janeiro da Fonseca, discovered that a large consignment of medical supplies forwarded by them to Fernandes for use in Mozambique had found their way onto the market in Europe. But since Fernandes still had the ear of Dhlakama and was apparently still toeing the South African line, the affronted factions were constrained from taking any action.

Then, earlier this month, South African intelligence became aware that Fernandes intended 'doing an Oliveira' on a massive scale. A decision was made to remove him before he could make any public overtures to the Frelimo government. Through MNR contacts in West Germany the South Africans gave approval for Fernandes' murder, stressing that time was of the essence. Arrangements were left to the contacts who are thought to have paid, with South African funds, for a professional, contract killing.

In the event, the abduction and killing of Evo Fernandes was carried out on 17 April, just one day after a document, signed by Afonso Dhlakama calling for unconditional negotiations with Frelimo was distributed in Lisbon by the MNR. This has caused still more difficulties for the already shaky political structure and there is some doubt whether the movement can be held together.

Within Mozambique as well there has been considerable factional blood-letting of late, particularly in the central Zambezia province where Dhlakama has been attempting to enforce his authority over a formerly independent rebel group headed by Commandante Gimo. The group, previously funded by a Malawi-based businessman named Gilberto, had joined with the MNR, but was threatening to break ranks.

Just how much influence is exerted by such shadowy figures as the black Mozambican and the naturalised US citizen, José Francisco and the white Mozambican-Portuguese-American José Maria Antar, is not known.