

And the death merchant died

MNR chieftain abducted and slain in Portugal x

HIS flamboyance and garrulity were as notorious as the pernicious cause which his organisation pursues. Once, during an audacious television interview, Evo Fernandes, a well-known spokesman for the Mozambique National Resistance movement (MNR) in Lisbon, tried, with the candence of a master propagandist, to justify the atrocities of the fearsome rebel organisation in Mozambique. He even threatened with impunity to invade Zimbabwe because of the latter's assistance to Maputo in containing the MNR scourge. Nemesis, it seems, has struck back. On April 21, nearly one week after he was declared missing, the lifeless body of Fernandes, 44, was picked up outside Lisbon, the Portuguese capital. Thus ended the ignominious career of the chieftain who was formerly the secretary-general of the bandit organisation.

Conflicting accounts still obscure the identity of his murderer(s). But the initial suspicion, following the alleged circumstances of the abduction, was aimed at the Mozambican government. Two abductors, claiming to act on behalf of Maputo, are believed to have met Fernandes, to initiate peace talks with the outlaws. Shortly after, he was seen outside a restaurant stepping into a car said to belong to a Mozambican security detail. Days later, Fernandes' bullet-poked body was discovered. Says Pascoal Mocumbi, the Mozambican foreign minister: "Mozambique does not commit acts of terrorism." Instead, he suggests, the murder was probably the grisly outcome of intra-MNR rivalry.

Foreign Minister Mocumbi's thesis appears to be buttressed by the recent testimony of another ex-spokesman for the rebels. Dreading the potentially internecine feud within the top echelons of the MNR, Paulo Oliveira, the bandits' chief spokesman between 1985 and last August, fled his home country Portugal to Mozambique, to take advantage of last December's amnesty law passed by the Mozambican Parliament

for all rebels who surrender.

At a news conference in Maputo last March, Oliveira spilled the beans. He disclosed that the MNR, largely propped up by South Africa, was being split into feuding camps by various power blocs, notably the United States, West Germany and France, seeking to wield control over the dangerous outfit. Both the MNR foreign relations secretary, Arthur Janeiro, and Fernandes, until his tragic end, were supported by Borin. Stragglers seeking to assert themselves, he hinted, might be on the prowl to liquidate opposition.

These intra-MNR wranglings could prove helpful to Maputo in dealing telling blows on the rebels. Already, the amnesty declared last December is magnetising some rebels. By mid-March, no fewer than 400 of them had surrendered, often bearing tales of disorganisation and diminishing logistic support, which has led to crippling reverses for the rebels, especially in the central provinces. Just a few weeks ago, a joint Zimbabwean and Mozambican operating force overran three rebel bases, one of them a regional headquarters in Gaza province. At least 177 bandits died in

the raid. Added to these, says Marcelino dos Santos, President of the Mozambican Assembly (Parliament): "We are mounting a massive military restructuring exercise, retraining our soldiers and generally mobilising our population against (the rebels)."

But these recent success stories do not necessarily becloud the resilience of the outlaws. They still infiltrate some loosely-policed rural areas where they leave their unmistakable signature. One such latest strike ended with the MNRs presiding over an enforced cannibalism: the bandits compelled a woman to kill, cook, then eat her own child. Said a tearful Jan Nico Scholten, president of the Association of West European Parliamentarians, on hearing the gory story during his visit to Mozambique in March: "People in Europe are just not aware of these beastly atrocities being perpetrated by the South African regime... We have to fight against the racist regime which is making all these people so unhappy... and that word (unhappy) does not express the situation in full."

By Kingsley Osadolor in Harare