

The Zone of Instability

In the mountain kingdom of Lesotho, an anti-South African guerrilla leader is decapitated, dismembered and left to rot on a riverbank. In Mozambique, the wife of a white communist who helps lead South Africa's black independence movement is killed by a letter bomb. In Zimbabwe, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe displays the bodies of three white South African soldiers who had infiltrated his country with a larger group of black troops. All apparently unrelated events—or are they?

South Africa's independent black neighbors frequently accuse the apartheid regime of trying to destabilize their countries. Now there is evidence to suggest that having lost its dream of maintaining white-dominated buffer states along South Africa's borders, Pretoria is indeed trying to create a "zone of

instability" in the black nations that harbor its opponents (map). South Africa actively backs insurgencies in Angola and Mozambique, and its hit squads operate with impunity in Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana. The region's own factional rivalries and political divisions create enough turmoil without a helping hand from Pretoria. In Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo's black rebels pose a growing challenge to Mugabe's rule. And ideological disputes have set comrade against comrade in the African National Congress (ANC), the principal guerrilla group opposing the Pretoria government.

In Lesotho, once a sanctuary of South African exiles, ANC malcontents are killing each other; the disputes range from murky power struggles to squabbles over women. After authorities found the head of

Zonwabele Pototo Mbali, an ANC exile, fellow ANC members pointedly did not attend the funeral. Since then, an explosion has killed the wife of another ANC official in Lesotho, and at least one ANC guerrilla has fled back to South Africa saying that he "felt safer" in the enemy camp.

Assassination: Mozambique blamed Pretoria for the letter bomb that killed Ruth First, a prominent communist intellectual whose husband, Joe Slovo, directs ANC military operations out of Maputo. The charge is reasonable: South Africa's intelligence service has a secret assassination department known as the "Z Squad," and the Slovos shared top bil-

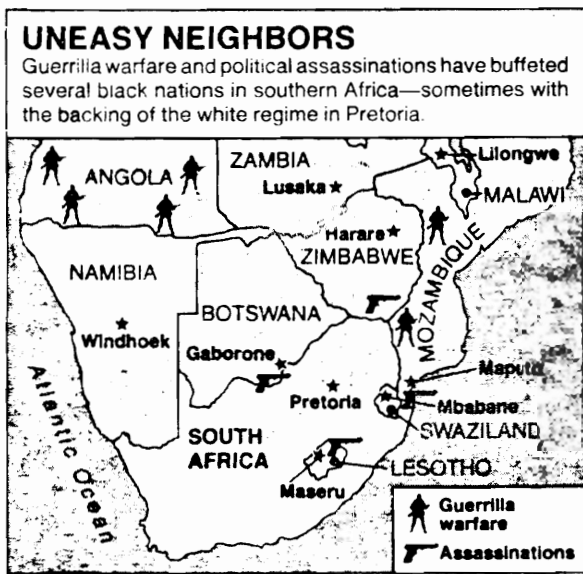
ing on its hit list. But there is an equally persuasive argument that First fell victim to ANC rivalries that have pitted "purist" black nationalists against communists who advocate a multiracial organization.

The South African connection was more obvious in the case of the three white guerrillas killed in Zimbabwe. The guerrillas were identified as former Rhodesian soldiers who had settled in South Africa when independence brought black majority rule to Zimbabwe; they were together with 14 black soldiers, also ex-Rhodesians. Zimbabwean troops intercepted them near a point where the frontiers of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa converge. Mugabe charged that the guerrillas were sent by South Africa to destabilize his government. South Africa responded that the infil-

trators had been on an "unauthorized" mission to free political prisoners from a Zimbabwean detention camp.

There is strong speculation, however, that the group was a South African resupply column taking a shortcut through Zimbabwe to a base of the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (MNR). Several years ago the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization formed the MNR as a fifth column intended to divert Mozambique's President Samora Machel from supporting Mugabe's guerrillas. When the Rhodesian war ended and Mugabe came to power, South Africa took over sponsorship of the Mozambican guerrillas. With South African backing, the guerrillas have managed to cut power in Mozambique's port of Beira, sabotage the oil pipeline from there to Zimbabwe and deny vast stretches of the Mozambican hinterland to Machel's government.

South Africa also supports Jonas Savimbi's UNITA guerrillas in Angola. South African raids, aimed ostensibly at smashing Namibian guerrilla camps in Angola, have actually opened up five provinces to Savimbi. His 30,000-man army now dominates all three provinces on Namibia's northern border and conducts raids within 100 miles of Luanda. Without the protection of 19,000 Cubans, Angola would have fallen. If the South Africans ever do manage to install their own man in Luanda, they will have taken a step toward the ultimate goal of their zone of instability: to create a new zone of stability under South African control.



NEWSWEEK/SEPTEMBER 6, 1982