

Cabora at crisis point

The two crises facing Cabora Bassa are the heavy rains, just past their peak, and the intensified guerrilla attacks. Underneath the flood of water, cascading at 3m. gallons a second, are two coffer dams and two deviation galleries. Outside the armed fortress at the site, the guerrillas lurk in the bush taking advantage of the mud and the rain eyeing the long transmission lines which stretch vulnerably towards South Africa. A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT reports.

THIS MONTH the Cabora Bassa dam will face two kinds of trouble, one natural, the other man-made. For it is about now that the recently constructed coffer dams will receive the full onslaught of the Zambezi floodwaters. And it will also be the ideal time for FRELIMO to step up its attacks on the Portuguese garrisons in the area. The Portuguese soldiers will be bogged down by muddy roads and air activity will be reduced to nil by low cloud ceilings. The initiative now appears to be with the guerrillas.

It was actually COREMO (Mozambique Revolutionary Committee) who first tried to infiltrate the Tete district where the dam is being built. As early as 1965 COREMO, kept away from the main fighting in the north and north-west by a more powerful FRELIMO, started using the Petauke area in Zambia as a base for the infiltration of political agitators into Mozambique. As late as December 1966 no mention had yet been made of the Tete district in the Portuguese military high command communiques. In February 1967 COREMO was accused for the first time of political activities in Tete. In December 1969, two months after the ZAMCO consortium had been awarded the contract for the construction of the dam, the guerrillas were said to be using "intimidation" on the local population in order to obtain their support. We are still a long way from Mao's "fish in water" situation but eventually, in April 1970, the guerrillas were said to have evolved from simple agitation to hit-and-run forays initiated from sanctuaries across the Zambian border. By then FRELIMO had muscled out the weaker COREMO from the picture.

Last year marked the beginning of an all-out attack by FRELIMO. Though the Portuguese vowed they had suffered only 20 casualties (seven dead plus 13 seriously wounded) during the first six months of the year, the six weeks from mid-September to end-October saw a steep increase in military action which *African Development* reported in detail in January.

On October 31 the Portuguese C-in-C, General Kaulza de Arriaga, declared that the war had been already won in the southern part of the Nyassa district, that it was being won in the north, next to the Tanzanian border, and that only in Tete were the Portuguese forces "behind schedule".

While the Portuguese were not happy about the time-table, the FRELIMO fighters kept attacking at a brisk pace. Between the General's speech and Christmas day:

- (1) four mines were detonated on the Mutarara-Tete road, six on the Tete-Zobue section of the Salisbury-Malawi road, one in the Bandara area, and two close to Changara;
- (2) one train was shot up;

- (3) two ambushes had taken place in the Tete-Zobue road;

- (4) in mid-November, two diesel oil-carrying freight cars and a water-tanker were completely destroyed between Chueza and Mcito by a mine which just about pulverised more than 400 yards of railway-line;

- (5) on December 7, a train was blown off the track between Moatize and Mutarara by a mine detonated by a guerrilla group hiding a few yards away;

- (6) in mid-December, a tractor-driven trailer was blown up by a mine in the Cauxira area, with the loss of 15 lives, including those of two local militiamen.

In all the Portuguese conceded that during the period in question they had suffered 30 casualties (13 plus 17) in the Tete district alone. No mention was made of any military activity elsewhere in Mozambique.

With the re-doubled zest of hard-pressed men, the 1,500 ZAMCO technicians kept on labouring on a 24-hour-day basis. In July 1971 the most difficult part of the work had been overcome when the Zambezi, then reduced to a respectable trickle, started to flow through a 440 yard-long, 50 ft. by 50 ft. deviation gallery on the right bank. The second gallery, on the left bank and at a slightly higher level, was considered operative in November. This brought to 1m. gallons of water a second the amount of flow which could be diverted through the two deviation galleries during the rainy season (November to March). The Zambezi, which has a basin of some 470,000 square miles, regularly reaches every year at the Cabora Bassa site a maximum flow-rate of more than 3m. gal./sec.

The two coffer-dams were also completed before the first rains. The greater of the two stands 140 ft. high and is 800 ft. deep at the base.

The success of the work done until now will depend on how the coffer-dams can outlast the Zambezi, since the deviation galleries will divert only one-third of the onrushing water. The coffer-dams will be covered by water until next May, when the river level will start to come down. May will then be the moment of truth for the Portuguese, for only then they will know whether the coffer-dams have resisted the floods successfully or whether the work is to be started all over again.

Outside the dam itself, the Tete district is bustling with activity: air traffic has increased by 100% in one year at the Tete airport; four private airline companies have been started with a total of some 10 light aircraft; the bridge over the Zambezi at Tete, which is 880 yards

long and cost close to \$1.8m., has been completed; the railway bridge at Dona Ana-Sena, built by British contractors in 1931-35, will be transformed to allow cars to cross it under their own power instead of having to be carried across on top of rail cars.

Despite the Second World War-styie romantic appeal of FRELIMO's London backers, the so-called "Dambusters Committee", the 17,650,000 cubic feet of concrete which will be poured at Cabora Bassa will probably prove to be too tough a nut to crack. If work goes according to schedule, the lake will start filling up in June 1974 and the dam's turbines housed in a 712 ft. by 95 ft. by 187 ft. "cathedral" will go on trial in March 1975.

But the Cabora Bassa dam has also its own Achilles heel: the 875-mile long power transmission line, which will eventually carry the electricity generated at Cabora Bassa to the Apollo sub-station, between Johannesburg and Pretoria. How are the eager Portuguese military men going to keep this line intact at all times? No amount of villager-herding, air-surveillance or ground-patrolling will have any telling effect.

If FRELIMO survives the moments of frustration and despair which will abound for the next two or three years then the time for sweet revenge will possibly come after the dam has started functioning. Much will depend of course on how the ultimate recipients of Cabora Bassa's electric bounty, South Africa, will react to FRELIMO's attacks on the power-line which, to a certain extent, the South Africans might feel inclined to call also their own...