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By CHRISTOPHER MUNNION in Johannesburg

SOUTH AFRICAN firefighters who flew to Marxist-run Mozambique to tackle a fuel depot blaze, said yesterday that they had been forced to sign statements saying the port fire was caused by the Rhodesians.

Mr Rodney Camp, the fire-fighters' leader, said a Government official made him sign when they flew to Beira.

"I scratched something on the statement because I did not want to put members of my team in danger," Mr Camp said on his return to South Africa.

The Rhodesian Government, which has admitted to a series of bombing raids against guerrilla camps in Mozambique in the past two weeks, has denied all knowledge of the ground attack against the Beira depot. The fire destroyed some 10 million gallons of fuel.

'18 troops killed'

An organisation called the Mozambique National Resistance Movement has claimed responsibility for the attack which was carried out in almost precisely the same way as the raid on Salisbury's main fuel storage plant last year.

The anti-Frelimo movement claimed that 18 government troops had been killed while only one of their guerrillas had been wounded.

President Samora Machel's regime claimed that Rhodesian "reactionary forces" had caused the fire in retaliation for the Salisbury raid which was carried out by Mozambique-based members of Mr Robert Mugabe's Zanu forces.

The South African Government, which maintains a close but clandestine economic relationship with President Machel's Communist-orientated government, was asked to provide emergency help to fight the fire on Friday night.

Six-man team

The six-man team led by Mr Camps, the man who flew to Rhodesia to quell the Salisbury fire, was flown into Beira in a special aircraft.

The South African team used techniques developed in fighting the Rhodesian fire. No public mention had been made in Mozambique about their arrival, as the authorities had not wanted it to be known that they alone could not handle the situation.

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The firefighters had the outbreak under control within half an hour.

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