

MOZAMBIQUE Africa

Rebels in limbo

(109)

Sept.

1980 p. 25-6

JOSEPH Mbunda adjusted the angle of his 40mm cannon and pressed the button. The first round of shells fell on Sitatonga 2, the main base in Maica province of guerrillas of the rebel Mozambique National Resistance Movement (MNR). The heavy attack that followed and the subsequent occupation of the base by Government troops, the People's Liberation Forces (FPLM) recently was part of on-going manoeuvres aimed at giving the soldiers experience in combined operations by ground and air forces, but also eliminating the MNR.

Piercing the skies above Mossurize District, some 50 kilometers from the Zimbabwean border, Sitatonga Mountain harbours a small number of villages cut off from the rest of the country by dense bush and an absence of important land communications. It was there that the MNR began building its base in January this year as Rhodesia entered its transition to independence.

Located at the top of the mountain,

the base and observation posts stretched over 20 square kilometers of trees and high grass with a 96 by 46-metre helicopter landing strip at the centre of the camp. A white T-shaped piece of parachute signalled the landing place for the helicopters, the most recent of which were seen by FPLM soldiers on June 18 this year as they began encircling the base.

According to MNR members, the helicopters came from South Africa bringing in new weapons and ammunition as well as food supplies. 'Two days later', said Agostinho Tiago, an ex-recruit of the MNR, 'two South African Nord Atlas planes dropped weapons in the central camp of the base'.

Inside the camp, South African and Portuguese military instructors, as

weapons and ammunition, many of them still closed, carried labels in English and Afrikaans. In the camp were also five cars, a number of sewing machines and other goods believed to have been taken by the MNR from merchants of Mossurize District.

As prisoners were interrogated, previous assertions about the MNR's composition were confirmed. Most of their fighting units were composed of ex-members of the Portuguese colonial army's special groups, which in 1972 became notoriously famous for a number of massacres in Mozambique at the time of FRELIMO's southern push toward the heartlands of Manica and Sofala.

They ran to Rhodesia before Mozambique's independence in June

1975. There they were armed and were subsequently monitored by the Rhodesians to operate according to the Rhodesian Army's overall strategy for Mozambique's Gaza, Manica, Tete and Sofala provinces. One of their practices was to kidnap men and women from local villages and either train them for military purposes or simply use them as servants.

According to some of these villagers freed by the FPLM during the on-going military operations, the MNR, promised different things in different places, namely, future ministerial posts for people of each operational area and salaries of up to 30 30,000 Escudos for the soldiers of 'the future Mozambican army'. Lately they were announcing that soon they would 'declare Mozambique's independence'.

The MNR, used Mozambique's current shortages to its advantage. Groups would stop a food lorry on a bush road, kill the driver or leave him on the road, steal the lorry and distribute the food among the villagers. In this way they hoped to get local support and minimize the negative effects of their most brutal practices, which included rape and the kidnapping of young girls. After ZANUPF's electoral victory in Zimbabwe, the MNR lost its Rhodesian backing and most of its armed groups could not afford to distribute the food anymore. They had to eat it themselves in order to survive. ■



Military parade in Maputo to mark last September's anniversary of the start of the liberation war...a force to deal with rebels

well as mercenaries 'of various nationalities', made last-minute preparations to leave the base as news of the coming attack reached the mountain top. 'They left by helicopter when the FPLM began encircling the mountain', said Tiago.

Infantry and artillery units of the FPLM, as well as a few of the air force's recently acquired MIG jet fighters, took part in the attack and follow up operations which left the MNR in total and, it appears, definitive disarray: 270 MNR guerrillas were killed and more than 300 were taken prisoner, 68 of them with their guns. By 5 p.m. on June 30 after some hours of shelling and occasional machine gun fire, the first FPLM infantry units entered the camp. Three days later the whole surrounding area was under control as the surviving groups scattered in different directions.

Amidst the captured war material were machine guns, bazookas, mortars, hand grenades and a huge quantity of anti-tank, anti-car and anti-personnel mines. The boxes containing