

Mozambique: Threat to SADC strategy

Recent sabotage attacks may signal a shift in Pretoria's military focus: cutting off Zimbabwe's and Zambia's access to the sea, reports Paul Fauvet from Maputo

The October 30 attack against the two key bridges, 50 km northwest of the port of Beira, may herald a new strategic approach by South Africa to its clandestine war against Mozambique.

South Africa, of course, denies all involvement in the sabotage, which has been claimed by the self-styled "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR). In fact, the MNR is funded, armed and trained by South Africa, and the Mozambican authorities claim that South African explosives experts formed part of the MNR sabotage team.

One of the sabotaged bridges carries the vital railway from Beira to Zimbabwe — the cheapest and simplest route to the sea for landlocked Zimbabwe's exports. The second bridge carries the main road from Beira to Maputo — but there is reason to believe that the real target was the Mozambique-Zimbabwe pipeline which is carried by the road bridge's supports. Fortunately, the saboteurs did not succeed in damaging the pipeline.

These are the first attacks of this nature since the end of the Zimbabwe war. They could well mean that the MNR/Pretoria strategy against Mozambique has now shifted its focus away from control over territory to the sabotage of carefully selected economic installations.

The main thrust of MNR activities over the past couple of years has been to secure

control over parts of the central provinces of Manica and Sofala, and thus effectively cut Mozambique in half. This strategy has failed. The sending in of trained bands of saboteurs, however, poses an altogether different problem for the Mozambican armed forces.

This time the Mozambican army (FPLM) had a stroke of luck. Nine days before the bridges were attacked, an FPLM patrol encountered what was almost certainly the same group of saboteurs trying to lay mines on the Beira-Umtali railway in Manica, some 35 km east of the provincial capital, Chimoio. Taking no chances, the Mozambican patrol opened fire on the group with bazookas. They hit one of the mines and in the ensuing explosion several of the saboteurs were blown to pieces. Their companions dropped much of their weaponry and other equipment and fled. The loss of many of their explosives in this encounter may explain the failure to damage the pipeline and also the relatively slight nature of the damage to the rail bridge.

At least four, and possibly as many as six, of the saboteurs died in the battle. One of the corpses was indisputably White and there was evidence that perhaps two more Whites had lost their lives. An MNR representative in Lisbon admitted that a White man had died — but claimed that he was a White Mozambican. The FPLM said that the dead saboteur was a South African soldier. Certainly a White Mozambican would have no use for the Portuguese-English dictionary and phrasebook that were among the material captured by the FPLM during the encounter. These would, however, have come in very useful for internal communication in the group if its White members were South Africans or mercenaries serving in the South African army.

Also captured were maps of central Mozambique which indicated the railway and the pipeline as priority targets for