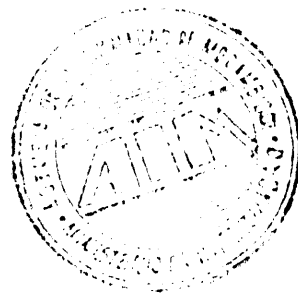


FUNHALOURO

by Anders Nilsson



The airstrip at Funhalouro is just a small opening in the bush. As our light plane flew gently in to the grass runway, we could see that it was ringed by dozens of soldiers of the Mozambican army (FPLM).

As we stepped out of the plane, the soldiers rushed forward to greet us. They were evidently in an excited, almost exuberant mood.

Travelling with us was Major-General Domingos Fondo, the military commander of Inhambane province. He started addressing his men in crisp, formal military style - but this did not last for long. These young soldiers were eager to tell their General what they had done, and their enthusiasm broke through the normal formality of military protocol.

For this was a company which had returned to Funhalouro not more than 40 minutes before our arrival. The previous night it had destroyed a major base of the South African sponsored 'Mozambique National Resistance' (MNR) at Palulo, some 60 kilometres further south.

At Palulo the MNR had tried to set up a replacement for their 'central base' at Tome, which had been seized by the FPLM in late August. Tome had been the scene of discussions between South African officers and MNR commanders, and it had been here that operations for all of southern Mozambique had been planned. An MNR column fleeing southwards from Tome had hastily constructed the Palulo base in September. It lasted for little more than two months. Far from relaxing after the capture of Tome, the FPLM has continued its offensive in Inhambane. Domingos Fondo's pledge that "we shall not give the enemy a moment's respite" was evidently not mere rhetoric.

The soldiers quickly arranged a display of some of the material captured at Palulo. Guns, grenades, mines and mortar shells were spread out on the ground for the residents of Funhalouro to view: also displayed were

radios, bicycles, and humble household items such as pots and pans - goods belonging to the local people, but stolen by the MNR. These will later be taken to nearby villages and handed over to their inhabitants. The army concedes that, for most of these goods, it will probably be impossible to locate the previous owner with any degree of certainty.

Funhalouro is in the heart of Inhambane province, some 150 kilometres inland. It has never been a big place. There used to be a handful of brick and concrete structures - the administrative offices, a primary school, a health post, a shop and a few houses.

Today it's even smaller. Half of the administrative building was burnt down in an MNR raid in early 1982. Only two or three rooms are usable now. The charred timbers have not been removed, but act as a stark reminder of the drama played out in Inhambane over the past two years.

The walls of the school are peppered with bulletholes. The interior walls are still blackened, and the wooden window frames were burnt to a cinder in the raid - but the building is back in use. The shop, however, is beyond repair - it is now little more than a pile of rubble.

Everywhere in Inhambane one finds the same trail of destruction - carcasses of burnt-out lorries, ruins of shops (some 400 shops in rural Inhambane have been destroyed), the scars of bandit attacks on storehouses, schools, health posts. People we spoke to who have suffered at the MNR's hands all tell the same sort of story: of ambushes on the roads, or of raids on villages or isolated homesteads in which the bandits deprived them of all their possessions.

Worse is the forced recruitment of young peasants. Thousands have been kidnapped and taken to MNR bases for military training. At an impromptu meeting in Funhalouro, Domingos Fondo shows seven of these bandits, captured at Palulo, to the local people. He appeals to the crowd to understand South Africa's use of bandit gangs. "They want Mozambicans to kill each other", he declares. "They want brother to kill brother, and then it will be easier for them to take over. So we must be careful, even with the bandits. We must

educate them, and bring them back to us".

The seven are a sorry sight. All are young, ranging in age from 16 to 20. In rags, and without their guns, they are more pathetic than frightening. These individuals have nothing to do with any 'opposition' to Frelimo. They have just been used as tools.

During our stay in Inhambane, we could spend half a day talking to captured bandits. From these discussions, and from a string of similar interviews with bandits carried out by other journalists, a consistent picture emerges. There appears to be a bandit hard-core leading the MNR's activity. They filter into an area, set up a base, and then start kidnapping peasant boys. These forced recruits are marched to the base, kept under guard, beaten to cow them into submission, and then trained in the use of guns and bazookas. They are told: "Now you are one of us. If you try to escape, Frelimo will kill you". They are forced to take part in ambushes or other typical MNR activities, perhaps are ordered to kill someone, and gradually they start to define themselves as bandits.

When they meet resistance from the Mozambican army or militia, MNR commanders retreat, using their raw recruits as a shield. The recruits are expendable, and many are abandoned when bases fall. Most of the bandits captured by the FPLM are these bewildered young recruits, forced to take up arms against their fellow-countrymen.

One soldier told us that when bandits attack villages or mount ambushes, they often act in groups of 50 or 60 - maybe half a dozen are in positions of command, MNR 'veterans', while the rest are the young forced recruits.

There seem to be three sources of bandit leaders. First, there are those who fled from Mozambique at the time of independence - former agents of the Portuguese secret police, the PIDE, former members of elite units in the colonial army and the like. Second, there are those who deserted from FRELIMO or from the FPLM for various reasons - Domingos Fondo cites the example of Afonso Dhlakama, the MNR's current 'supreme chief'. In 1975 he was in charge of military stores in Beira. Caught with his hands in the till,

he was dismissed from his post, and then fled across the border into Ian Smith's Rhodesia. More recently, a trickle of corrupt officials from the police, the army and the rest of the state apparatus have gone over to the MNR. They are escaping from punishment, and seeking their vengeance on the Mozambican government.

Domingos Fondo does not believe that guns alone will defeat this enemy. He is schooled in the experience of FRELIMO's ten year independence war, and of the administration of the areas in the north of the country liberated from colonial control during the war. His preferred solutions are therefore political rather than strictly military.

Discussions must be held with the people, not only so that they understand the nature of this war, but also so that they can rehabilitate captured bandits. "Our task today is to bring the experience of the liberation war to these parts of the country", he explains. "Then we can explain to the population how the enemy acts. Our combat is essentially a political one".

The South Africans organise the show, but the actors are Mozambicans. "If we just take up our guns and go off to kill our relatives, then we'll be making a mistake," General Fondo tells the crowd at Funhalouro. "Clemency is necessary".

The crowd does not seem to agree. Their hostility towards the bandits is quite open. Women stand up and accuse the miserable captives of the robberies and murders committed by the MNR in the area. People in Funhalouro have lost relatives and friends, they have lost property, crops and livestock, they have seen their lives disrupted by this surrogate war. They are angry, and there is no doubt that the presence of Mozambican troops is necessary for the bandits' own safety.

Perhaps the most electric moments of this meeting took place when some women captives were paraded before the crowd. One was the mistress of the bandit commander at Palulo, a role which she had apparently played willingly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!", shouts an enraged older woman. She moves closer. There is no soldier in the way, so she grabs her chance and

strikes the younger woman full in the face.

Other members of the crowd have recognised the prisoner and shout her name. Another woman steps forward. She is the second wife of this bandit's father. The two women, on opposite sides of the barricades that Pretoria has built in Inhambane, stand and stare silently at each other.

"South Africa sends its guns in here, and wages war within our very families", comments Domingos Fondo as we leave Funhalouro.

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