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Fighting banditry in Zambezia

by Paul Fauvet

Our helicopter arrived at Maganja da Costa at about midday. Smoke was still rising from the two houses on the outskirts of the town that had been destroyed that morning.

The town of Maganja (which, despite its name, is not actually on the coast) is in the middle of Mozambique's Zambezia province. Zambezia has the dubious distinction of being singled out by President Samora Machel in June 1983 as the province most seriously affected by South African sponsored banditry.

The bandits in question, from the self-styled "Mozambique National Resistance", had called in at Maganja on December 22, just seven hours before we did. Their visiting cards, in the shape of spent cartridges, were liberally scattered around the northern approaches to the town. Their bootprints were still clearly visible in the fields they had trampled through.

A Mozambican officer showed us round the scene of the attack, reconstructing for us the events of the morning. The MNR group, which had been about 30 strong, had mainly used light weapons. One bazooka was also involved, but seems to have caused no damage other than smashing some branches off a nearby mango tree.

The MNR attack against Maganja had been frustrated by a prompt response from the Mozambican army and militia. The relatively small garrison at Maganja is strategically placed, dominating the northern approach, and the bandits had proved quite unable to get past the line of defence which the soldiers had quickly formed. They were therefore unable to force their way into the town itself, which was presumed to have been their aim.

The raid started shortly after 4.00 am and exchanges of gunfire lasted until 5.15, when the MNR broke off its attack and retreated. Two outlying houses were set on fire by the bandits - fortunately no-one was in either

of them at the time. The bandits may have believed that these houses were connected to the garrison: in fact, they were both owned by ordinary Maganja civilians. Eight kilometres away, the group also destroyed the installations of a newly created production unit of the provincial cashew company. But since these offices and warehouses were built in traditional daub and wattle style, using only local materials, the damage was minimal, and they will easily be rebuilt. Not a successful raid for the bandits.

And when that MNR group returned to its base, it would have had an unpleasant surprise. For that same day the Mozambican air force launched strikes against two bandit bases in the western part of Maganja da Costa district. From the town of Maganja the distant thud of rocket fire could be heard as Mozambican aircraft strafed the bases, at Viola and Nigula. The airforce returned to the attack the following day, flying several sorties. By the afternoon of 23 December there cannot have been much left of the two camps.

Also knocked out in this attack was an airfield, apparently dating from colonial times, which the provincial military command believed had been used by the bandits to receive South African supplies brought in by air. Unidentified aircraft have occasionally been observed in the skies of Zambezia.

The airlift of weaponry to Zambezia, an enormous distance from the South African border, implies one of two possibilities. Either the South Africans are flying in from neighbouring Malawi, with or without the connivance of some Malawian officials. Or the South African planes carry extra fuel tanks with all the additional costs that that entails. But ~~South Africa has never~~ let financial or logistical problems interfere with its clandestine war in Mozambique.

The MNR first appeared in Maganja da Costa district in November 1982. They made straight for the small town of Mocubela in the north of the district, where they destroyed a cotton ginning mill and a chipboard factory. In 1983, they moved further south, towards the coast, launching their first

attack on Maganja town in July (the December attack was the second). Further to the east, a coconut plantation at Bajone came under attack in early December.

Although by no means all the province is directly affected by banditry, the MNR's activities in Zambezia are particularly serious given the economic importance of the province. Zambezia provides about 50 per cent of Mozambique's export earnings, so the disruption of transport in the province, preventing or delaying these goods from being moved, can have a serious impact on Mozambique's already precarious foreign exchange situation. Maganja da Costa and other coastal districts are major producers of cashew and copra. At Luabo, on the east bank of the Zambezi, is one of Mozambique's six state-owned sugar plantations. The north of the province contains the country's tea plantations, while in the centre there are pegmatite mines, and geological surveys indicate further, as yet untapped, mineral wealth.

Zambezia is also the bridge between the three northern provinces (Niassa, Cabo Delgado and Nampula) and the rest of the country. Running through Zambezia is the Centre-North power line that will eventually provide the whole of northern Mozambique with electricity from the Cahora Bassa dam in Tete province, and also the Centre-Northeast road which should work wonders for communications in this part of the country.

It was in Zambezia that the MNR carried out one of its most spectacular raids when, on 21 August 1983, a heavily armed gang murdered two Soviet technicians and kidnapped 24 others at the mining complex of Morrua. These men, part of a Soviet geology team, have been marched for long distances from base to base. The harsh conditions have taken their toll, and two of the captives are known to have died from illness on their journeyings. A further eight, however, managed to escape. The remaining 14 are still in MNR hands.

This is a factor which the Mozambican army (FPLM) has to take very seriously into account in its operations in Zambezia. Saving the lives of innocent civilians held captive by South Africa's stooges is a high priority.

and obviously informs the whole strategy followed by the FPLM in the area where the kidnapped Soviets are believed to be held.

Morale amongst the Mozambican troops in the province is high, and the wave of panic that had gripped the provincial capital, Quelimane, in June has receded. Then, people were fearful that the MNR might capture the city. Now Quelimane is calm, and it would be hard to imagine, from a stroll round its peaceful streets, that there is a war going on two or three hours drive away.

Security in the province improved noticeably after President Samora Machel swore in a new military command in April, under Brigadier José Ajape Ussene, who was in charge of the Mozambican volunteers who fought inside Zimbabwe during the war against the Smith regime. As from October the FPLM has been on the offensive in Zambezia. Along the banks of the river Shire the army regained control of areas that had effectively been in MNR hands for a year or so. People returned to the small towns of Pinda and Megaza, which had been largely abandoned after bandit attacks in 1982. Fishing activity on the Shire (once an important source of fish, not only for Zambezia, but also for Sofala and Nampula provinces) restarted. These areas had been comprehensively looted by the MNR. At Megaza, the MNR gangs had even ripped zinc sheeting off the roofs and taken it over the border to sell in Malawi.

By securing this area, the FPLM has cut off a possible line of retreat southwards for the MNR, into the province of Sofala. The value of destroying bases is reduced if the bandits themselves escape and can regroup elsewhere. Unfortunately the lengthy frontier with Malawi is virtually impossible to seal. Thus, regardless of the wishes of the Malawian authorities, Malawi remains as a potential bolthole for the MNR groups operating in Zambezia.

The bandits also enjoy favourable natural conditions in parts of the province. Flying over central Zambezia, one observes nothing but a thick

tangle of trees. This is not bush in the normal sense of the term, but forest. And it offers ideal conditions for large groups of armed men to take cover. Much of Maganja da Costa is like this. Winkling the MNR out from these forest hideaways will prove a time-consuming job.

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