

Zimbabwe army fights rebels in Mozambique

GODWIN MATATU reports from Tete Province

THE north-western Mozambican province of Tete is under siege by guerrillas of the rebel Mozambique National Resistance (MNR). The guerrillas are operating with such impunity that most of the roads in the beleaguered province are either impassable or extremely dangerous.

The only route in regular use is the main artery from Nyamapanda, on Zimbabwe's north-eastern border with Mozambique, to Zobue, on the frontier with Malawi, where units of Zimbabwe's 1st Mechanised Battalion escort convoys through 150 miles of lonely and unfriendly country.

They are commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jesse Hickman, an American Vietnam veteran and one of the few white officers in high positions in the Zimbabwe National Army.

Based at Moatize, a coal mining town outside the province's capital, Tete, the battalion virtually controls a corridor 12 miles wide, six miles on either side of the road, through the heart of Tete. They escort convoys of up to 100 vehicles carrying goods between Zimbabwe and Malawi.

The escort was introduced last April after the MNR had ambushed lorries carrying badly-needed drought relief food destined for Zimbabwe, which has contracted to buy some 70,000 tonnes of maize from Malawi this year.

The escort is heavily armed, usually consisting of a company of soldiers with heavy machine-guns mounted on armoured personnel carriers. The Zimbabwe army has also deployed the highly mobile and versatile Brazilian-made Cascavel armoured cars.

'Things are now better since the Zimbabwean soldiers came in. Before we could be ambushed at any time and the Mozambican army was unable to protect us,' said a truck driver.

However, the convoys have not been immune. Three weeks ago, a 100-strong guerrilla band ambushed a convoy a few miles outside Zobue. In the ensuing battle, the Zimbabwean army claims, 17 guerrillas were killed and several Zimbabwean soldiers wounded.

'We know they will try again but they know that we are not sitting ducks. We will hammer them hard,' boasted Lieutenant Josephat Kudumba the adjutant of the battalion.

The Zimbabwean soldiers appear hungry for battle with the MNR but they are limited by the agreement between the governments of Mozambique and Zimbabwe which gives them only six miles of hot pursuit on either side of the road.

The ease with which the MNR operates in Tete shows the weakness of the Mozambican army. In contrast to the highly mobile well-dressed and heavily-armed Zimbabweans, the Mozambicans have no transport, no communications and appear to lack the will to fight. Last week near Zobue, a foot patrol, most of them dressed in what looked like cast-off Russian winter uniforms with old weapons on their backs, were begging food from the Zimbabweans. They said they had not eaten for two days.

Burnt out

The road between Moatize and Zobue is littered with dozens of burnt-out vehicles that were destroyed before the Zimbabweans moved in. Most of the villages have been abandoned and those still inhabited are under constant threat of attack by the MNR.

The remaining villagers appear to welcome the presence of the Zimbabweans. 'We like them here,' said one elderly woman. 'We feel safe now and besides they give us food from time to time.'

What food they get from the

Zimbabweans can only be a palliative. Nearly 17,000 people died of starvation in the province between 1982 and 1984. Up to 60,000 fled to Zimbabwe last year, according to relief workers.

Relations between the Zimbabwean army and Mozambican armies are evidently cold.

Just outside Tete the other day, the commander of Mozambique's Fourth Brigade, Brigadier Juma, had his unmarked Land Rover forced off the road by a Zimbabwean armoured personnel carrier. The diminutive brigadier angrily approached Lieutenant Kudumba to protest.

Pointing to his epaulettes he shouted: 'Look, I am a brigadier and your men are playing joy with me and forcing me off the road. Just who is ruling here now? All these lorries are capitalist and we can stop them.' The young Zimbabwean adjutant apologised while his men looked on, laughing.

Tete is now cut off from the rest of Mozambique and there is growing concern that the situation may get worse.

Authoritative sources in Mozambique and in Pretoria say the joint Mozambican/South African security commission approached the Zimbabwe Government seeking permission for a South African army convoy to travel through Zimbabwe to Tete for the 'protection and maintenance' of the Caborra Bassa hydro-electric scheme. Last May, following the Nkomati accord between President Samora Machel and South African Premier P. W. Botha, South Africa and Mozambique signed an agreement to supply Pretoria with electricity from the dam.

The Zimbabwean Government initially turned down the request, but when the Mozambicans repeated it on the eve of the Zimbabwe-Mozambique Solidarity Week—the Harare Government found it difficult to refuse.

Last week, according to a reliable report, seven unmarked South African army trucks made their way to Mozambique via Mutare in eastern Zimbabwe.

The Observer

London (GB)

Circ. w. 929 000

Argus Media No. 5797

29 Juli 1984