

MOZAMBIQUE

# On the trail of the MNR

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Frelimo regulars on the trail of the MNR in Mozambique.

Phil Cohen, a British journalist, spent several weeks in Mozambique with soldiers from Mozambique's Frelimo slogging the bush and searching for the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR), finding how they work and what motivates them in the crucial struggle for power. Here is his dramatic report . . .



South African markings on a gun captured from the MNR.

CAPTAIN Manuel Casse looked an intimidating figure in his black glasses, beret and military camouflage uniform. He stood impassively with arms folded on the airport tarmac flanked by a line of soldiers to welcome my arrival at Vilanculos on the coast of Mozambique.

Yet just half an hour later he was leading his Frelimo soldiers in singing and dancing at their bush camp to celebrate the fact that they had just captured a base about 70 kilometres inland formerly held by bandits claiming allegiance to the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR).

Although the Nkomati non-aggression pact in March, signed with South Africa, was designed to cut off all supplies to the rebels, their attacks continue in different parts of the country, even now stretching into the northern province of Cabo Delgado which was previously said to be free of fighting.

Captain Casse, operations chief for Inhambane province and a veteran of the war against the Portuguese, said 400 of his men attacked the large bandit base at a place called Belami on August 13, killing 38 rebels and losing one of their own.

The rebels were armed with AK47 machine guns, bazookas and 81 calibre mortars, and put up stiff resistance for two hours before fleeing. Documents taken showed the band to number 210.

The Frelimo camp was a dry and sandy clearing in the bush, guarded on all sides. The Captain addressed his troops, who had just returned from the battle site, and seemed in good heart, reasonably clothed and armed.

They echoed his cries of 'viva Frelimo,' 'the struggle continues' and 'death to the armed bandits', the latter accompanied by a vicious downward movement of the right fist. He said that before the battle they had to locate the enemy with the help of local people, and sent a small advance party within 500 metres of the camp to observe their strength.

"They obviously have some kind of a command structure, although they didn't put up normal army resistance, more guerilla style. They will not attack the army because they know they are asking for a coffin, so they go for isolated people who cannot defend themselves," the chief said.

The Captain joined Frelimo in 1972 in



Above: A captured member of the MNR displays his sub-machine gun to the cameras. Right: Frelimo soldiers dance and relax after the day's hunt.



Manica and had trained in Tanzania and the Soviet Union. He explained that this unit was territorial – composed of local people who knew the terrain so “it is in their interests to defeat the bandits so they can plant crops and be able to eat.”

Frelimo was still a guerilla army, he insisted, not based in barracks but in the bush in the way they operated during the independence war with the Portuguese. Yet it is obviously strange for them to be faced with hit-and-run forces who do not use regular army tactics.

When I asked him how long the fighting with the bandits would go on he replied: “That depends on another country – South Africa. It is in their hands.” This was a reference to persistent reports that the rebels are still being supplied, either by the government, elements in the military in South Africa or former Portuguese settlers who long for a return to former colonial times.

His earlier reference to a command structure seemed to be confirmed by the piles of documents taken from the bandit base. They lay in a heap in the afternoon sun next to captured Soviet bazookas, South African rifles with initials RAS (Republic of South Africa) on them, mortars, about 15 radios, tape recorders, clothes and blankets stolen from peasants, and South African military uniforms.

The documents, some in exercise books and notebooks clearly of South African origin, referred to “group commanders” and “zonal commanders” of the MNR. There was a typed letter dated July 30 1984 to the senior regional commander requesting a typewriter and signed “revolutionary greetings, A Lutta Continua.”

Meetings of MNR cadres were recorded discussing problems of food and water, and the need to clean wells. A Commander Machava had made a note in a South African triplicate book regarding the possible execution of his own aide-de-camp and another soldier because they had gone off with a woman who had turned him down.

Evidence of the crudity of the material was a notebook in which someone had written 10 points outlining the way to force a woman to have sex.

A MNR leaflet attacked what it called “Machelist politics” (those of President Samora Machel) which had created “the most cruel and barbarous forms of oppression.” There was a large number of the colour pictures of Afonso Dhlakama, self-styled president of the rebels, who is an ex-Frelimo soldier.

The MNR cleverly twist the truth for their propaganda purposes. One booklet claimed that Felipe Samuel Magaia, an officer who died in the independence struggle in 1966, was killed by “Soviet

imperialist agents who infiltrated Frelimo.” They said the same fate befell Andre Matsangaissa, who was one of the MNR leaders until he was killed by Frelimo.

In the shade of a tree near this display were five captured bandits, four of them young men in poor clothing, the fifth an older man who seemed more prepared to talk. I spoke to many such bandits around Mozambique, often teenagers looking pathetic in rags, who had been taken forcibly and later escaped or been captured.

One said he had been taken by bandits along with his brother, who was a sort of tribal chief in colonial times. The bandits wanted him to perform religious ceremonies among the peasants. This is in line with a bandit demand that “everyone must be free to practice the cult which each wants to follow.”

Another bandit said they were forced to rob people in their homes and carry off stolen food and clothes. If they refused, they were tortured by having to sleep tied up with sticks. The bandits were told about Dhlakama but never saw him.

One bandit who said he met the leader was Helder Lopez, aged 22. I interviewed him at the ex-colonial Military Club in Maputo in a room packed with armed Frelimo soldiers.

### Forcible recruitment

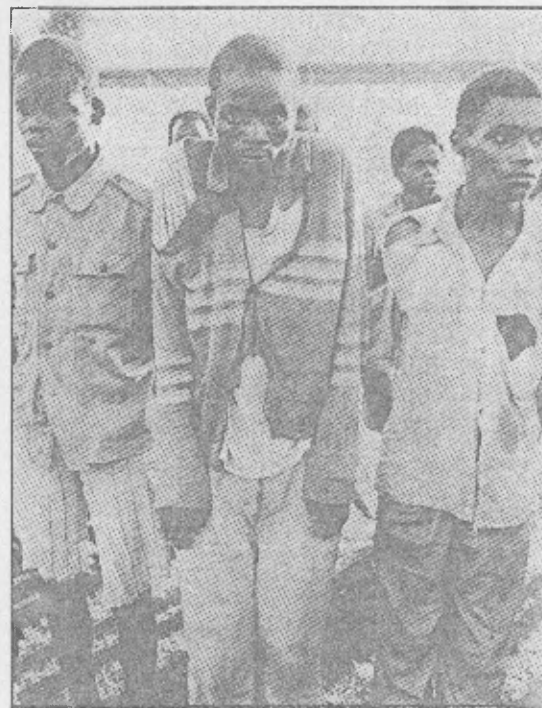
He was seized from his house in Inhambane last year, held at a base in Mozambique called Mushanat for three months, then taken by helicopter to Pietersburg in South Africa and later to a place called Camp Number Nine for training as a radio operator.

“I was trained by a group of mercenaries, some Israelis, Zimbabweans, South Africans and others from different countries. Some people were trained in the use of weapons and as parachutists. Those with higher intelligence were chosen to work on the *Voice of Free Africa* radio,” he said.

He wanted to run away but he was in a strange country and could not see a way of escaping. After three months he was brought back into Mozambique to work as a radio controller, guiding planes in to make drops and making signal fires for them.

A friend of his in the bands was hurt in a battle with FPLA forces and he started to think that the weapons brought from South Africa might be used to kill his own family. This led him to hand himself over to the government in October last year.

Asked about the bandit life, Lopez said they were told they could not spend money on food and had to attack villages to obtain it. He saw Dhlakama once in South Africa. “We were told we had to follow the line of Eduardo Mondlane (former Frelimo president) which was the capitalist path, not the line of Samora Machel.



Captured MNR; some of them are teenagers forced into service.

“They said we were fighting for the good of the people and that the aim was to free the people. Dhlakama said South Africa was the path to follow, but I still believed it was a racist society despite this.”

It must be remembered that the bandits I spoke to were under guard by Frelimo, which may or may not have influenced what they were saying. Certainly many of the stories seemed credible.

On August 7 I was standing in the Costa du Sol football stadium outside Maputo. On the terraces sat, not cheering football fans, but virtually the whole of Maputo’s diplomatic corps, including new British and American ambassadors Eric Vines and Peter de Vos.

### Extraordinary display

It was not a day for a match, but an extraordinary display of about 100 bandits together with ammunition, weapons, and radio equipment captured by the army. Soldiers stood all round the terraces guarding the stadium.

Two groups of 50 bandits were led in marching double file, the first often wearing rags that hung off their bodies, the second in prison uniform. All were barefoot.

On display were South African radio sets, Soviet Kalashnikov machine guns, some rocket equipment from Portugal, Chinese hand-grenades, mines and bazookas. These were pointed out by Major General Hama Thai, head of the airforce, who interrogated several bandits by pointing his baton at



Local militia called up to fight alongside Frelimo.

them and firing questions.

One said he was told they were fighting to disrupt the economy but other details of the programme were secret. Another said the leaders told him they were against socialism and for capitalism, against communal villages and food queues, and for people working for themselves not for other people.

### Bandits re-educated

The government undoubtedly has a dilemma with the 4,000 bandits it says are detained in prison. It feels it cannot put them on trial or release them so it puts them through "re-education" programmes for the moment.

Carlos Cardozo, director of the Mozambican news agency AIM, said people felt so angry about what the bandits had done that they would kill them if they were released. "They usually give themselves up only to the army because of this."

I saw this anger in victims of bandit attacks lying in hospitals all over the country. Antonio Joaquim, 37, had his right leg amputated after he was caught in a bazooka attack on lorries attached to the

column protected by Zimbabwean troops between Malawi and the Zimbabwean border.

The attack took place on April 21 this year and the civilian trucks were unfortunate enough to be lying some way behind the troops so they were vulnerable. He was hit in the leg and fainted, later to wake up in Tete hospital.

A tailor in Tete itself, he is married with five children. He said the state would pay for an artificial leg and he would work from home. "They are bandits, criminals," he said bitterly. "If I had one near me I would get an axe and kill him straightaway."

There are many such individual tragedies up and down the country, and it would seem that the MNR have little hope of establishing any popular base because their actions have alienated so many people.

The government of South Africa still maintains the fiction that the MNR are waging an internal struggle with Frelimo. A pamphlet on the Cabora Bassa dam agreement, published by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Johannesburg in July this year, describes them as "local insurgents who have taken up arms against the Frelimo government."

## NKOMATI'S FALSE DAWN

When President Machel signed the Nkomati accord he hoped that the MNR problem would simply go away. He understood that when South Africa withdrew its support the MNR would collapse but in **Mohamed Musa Mawani's** view the MNR has a base as an expression of long-standing opposition to Frelimo

SIX MONTHS after signing its non-aggression pact with South Africa, Mozambique's hard-pressed Marxist government is showing signs of growing desperation. The war against the anti-government Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) guerrillas has been going badly and Maputo's expectations of large-scale South African trade and aid to revive its dying economy, have not materialised.

### Top level contacts

In June and July these pressures led to high level government contacts with the MNR aimed at finding a basis for talks. Reliable government sources say that two leading members of the Maputo government, Jacinto Veloso and Oscar Monteiro have met MNR representatives in Europe and in "a neighbouring country". It is a new departure for President Samora Machel and his Marxist-Leninist FRELIMO party, who in the past have never declined to negotiate with opponents, outside the country's only legal party, or within.

One important obstacle to negotiations was overcome on June 15 when President Machel sacked three of the most pro-Soviet hard-liners from his council of ministers: Lieutenant-General Armando Guebuza, the Interior Minister, in charge of the police; Major-General Mariano Matsinhe, the Security Minister in charge of the armed forces, and Carlos Lobo, Minister of Mineral Resources. It gave him more room for manoeuvre.

All this implies changing priorities in Maputo with survival a more pressing problem than ideology. When President Machel met South African Prime Minister Piet Botha on March 16 at the Nkomati River border between the two countries to sign the non-aggression treaty known as the 'Nkomati Accord' his expectations were higher than the occasion justified. The results have been far less.

The treaty bound each country to not harbour or help its neighbour's guerrilla opponents. On the Mozambican side it led to an abrupt and ruthless crackdown by the Maputo government against members of

South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, the African National Congress. Some 800 ANC political cadres and refugees were expelled from Mozambique, while a number of ANC guerrillas were reportedly killed trying to slip into Swaziland in a vain attempt to avoid being hunted down by Mozambican troops.

President Machel signed at Nkomati out of sheer desperation. Nearly a decade of doctrinaire political programmes coupled with administrative incompetence had ruined the country's economy and turned much of its population against his government. At the same time he was facing growing pressures from the MNR rebels. By signing, he hoped to curb South African support for the MNR and end the guerrilla attacks which have brought his regime to its knees.

It was not enough. The idea that the eight-year-old guerrilla war could be brought to an end simply through a rapprochement with South Africa, included a large measure of wishful thinking. The MNR, the key factor in the equation was not involved in the Nkomati talks and MNR President Afonso Dhlakama said then that he would continue fighting until the Machel regime was overthrown.

It may have been a case of repeating one's own propaganda until one came to believe it. The Maputo government has always insisted that the MNR were simply *bandidos armados* - armed bandits and an extension of the South African army. So without South African support it should

collapse or quietly fade away. But that did not happen. There is plenty of evidence that the MNR is the expression of long-standing opposition to Machel and his ruling FRELIMO party — opposition that originated within FRELIMO itself.

Far from being reduced, MNR guerrilla attacks have intensified throughout the country since the signing of the Nkomati Accord. The guerrillas have stepped up their activities, extending their operations into two new provinces, Cabo Delgado on the Tanzanian border, and Maputo province in the south, where they are threatening to isolate the capital.

In drought-stricken southern and central Mozambique, the government claims to have cleared the guerrillas from Inhambane province, but this is contradicted by international relief agency officials. They say that government troops are confined to the main towns and main roads. The guerrillas control the countryside and the relief agencies have started withdrawing their staff from the province because of lack of security.

### No shortage of arms

Maputo's main objective at Nkomati was ostensibly to cut off supplies to the MNR, but the rebels appear unconcerned. They seem to have no shortage of arms and guerrilla leader Alfonso Dhlakama claims to have enough supplies on hand to fight for at least three years. "Our ammunition", he says with a quiet smile, "will last longer than the Machel regime."

Dhlakama could well be right, and not only because of his arms supplies. The FRELIMO regime seems to have forgotten some prime lessons of the long guerrilla war against the Portuguese. The FRELIMO guerrillas used to describe themselves as; "fish swimming in the sea of the people". But nowadays in rural Mozambique the people are helping the MNR guerrillas. Often they are the same guerrillas — but a decade or so older.

Nevertheless, the MNR leaders are looking for new sources of support to carry on the war. During the past six months top rebel leaders have made extensive contacts in Europe, the USA and the Middle East. They have apparently had some success. Six months ago they were operating on a tight financial leash, now they seem to have reliable sources of funds.

They are also consolidating their support among Mozambican exiles in Africa, the USA, and Europe. Last November exile leaders attended a special meeting of the MNR's "National Council" (Executive Committee) held near Kiel in West Germany under the auspices of a leading figure of the Federal Republic's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The National Council was later expanded to

give a larger voice to the exiled politicians.

Guerrilla depredations and the worst drought in living memory have nearly finished off the remnants of the Mozambican economy. Maputo has had to reschedule some \$1.4 billion of foreign debts owed to Western governments, banks and financial institutions. By the end of 1983 Mozambique was \$150m in arrears on its debt payments with a further \$242m falling due in 1984. This does not include the country's massive debts to the Eastern Bloc which also have to be repaid.

### Economic pressures

But Mozambique's moribund economy cannot even produce the money to keep the country functioning, let alone repay its debts. Few significant enterprises are still operating and fewer still are making a profit. This was another reason for the Nkomati Accord. South Africa was seen as the most likely source of relief.

Mozambique has little to sell except migrant labour, the use of its ports and railways and electricity from the huge Cabora Bassa Dam on the Zambezi river. South Africa is the main customer for all of these. In March, Maputo negotiated a new agreement with Pretoria for supply of Cabora Bassa electricity which, if implemented, would bring in an additional £11m a year in hard currency. But little electricity gets delivered. The transmission lines pass through 900 kilometres of guerrilla territory. Most of the time the lines are down due to MNR sabotage.

The railways and road are also under constant guerrilla attack. The rail lines to Mozambican ports from Zimbabwe and Malawi are often cut, while rebel ambushes and land mines have effectively isolated north western Mozambique from the rest of the country, and made surface communications almost impossible in much of central and northern Mozambique. Several thousands of Zimbabwean troops are in central Mozambique to help guard roads, railways and pipelines, but their effectiveness is limited.

The MNR have always paid close attention to the economic side of the war. By concentrating much of their effort on economic targets they have played an important role in bringing the country's inept economy to virtual collapse. This has helped consolidate public opposition to a government and economic system which even at the best of times was never able to feed its people.

The drought has intensified all the country's problems. More than 100,000 Mozambicans have already died from drought-induced famine in southern Mozambique and the northwestern province of Tete, and tens of thousands of others have crossed the border into

Zimbabwe in search of food. But there are indications that the death toll may be much higher. While international relief agencies are bringing food aid to the more accessible parts of the drought areas, neither relief workers nor food aid are reaching large areas under rebel control.

The MNR claims to have 16,000 guerrillas in the field. Mozambican government sources admit to 12,000. In either case the guerrillas have attracted a great deal of popular support, otherwise the rag-tag band of a dozen "re-education camp" escapees put together by the late Andre Matadi Matsangaisse in 1976 to form the MNR, could never have survived the past eight years of guerrilla warfare, much less grown into a force of over 12,000 guerrillas.

### Shadows from the past

The reasons — the real ones — are not all economic. There are others with deep-seated historical and sociological bases going back to the myth — and it always was a myth — of non-racialism in Portugal's African colonies. This was widely believed in the outside world, but clashed with reality as black Mozambicans see it in which half of the government and a still higher proportion of senior administrators are drawn from the remnants of the small white, Indian and mulatto elite, who now constitute less than one per cent of Mozambique's 13 million people. It is a situation which would not be tolerated for long in any independent African country.

Many of Mozambique's current problems arise from the fact that these non-indigenous groups who were a key element of the colonial system were also the principal source of Marxist cadres. This has not helped the Maputo government's popularity with rural Africans.

The MNR's political programme reflects the influence of the nationalist exile leadership. It calls for a multi-party political system with a free-enterprise economy and a constitution incorporating an American-style bill of human rights. But all these conflict with the basic tenets of the present Marxist government.

The Machel government is increasingly disenchanted with the Nkomati Accord because it had hoped for too much from it. The South Africans agreed to stop supplying the rebels, which they did. But President Machel expected them to call a halt to the MNR insurgency, which was beyond their powers. He was ignoring a basic reality — that the MNR has become the focal point for the entire gamut of opposition to his regime. It has absorbed the exiles and diversified its sources of aid.

President Machel has virtually no chance of winning the war in the foreseeable future and will need massive military and economic aid just to survive.