

Secret airlift to Machel's foes

Observer
2 Dec.
1984

from GODWIN MATATU in Johannesburg

GUERRILLAS fighting to overthrow the Mozambique Government are being supplied with arms by a secret airlift from the Middle East.

Unmarked C-130 freight planes fly from Oman and Saudi Arabia to the Comoros Islands in the Indian Ocean. There the arms are transferred to light planes for night drops near guerrilla bases in northern Mozambique.

When I went to the Comoros to investigate this 3,000-mile arms trail, the police commissioner ordered my arrest and deportation. This came after I had tried to contact Colonel Bob Denard, the celebrated mercenary of many African wars.

Denard runs the 350-strong palace guard of President Ahmed Abdullah, dictator of the Comoros, and his name has been linked with the Mozambique arms operation.

Before deporting me, Police Commissioner Djambae also claimed that I had tried to photograph a C-130 and two short take-off Britten-Norman Islander planes at Moroni, the main airport in the Comoros.

It is believed that the islanders are used for the 400-mile round trip to Nampula province, a stronghold of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) guerrillas.

The airlift helps to explain the continuing strength of MNR, which until March this year was being openly helped by South Africa. When President Samora Machel agreed to sign a non-aggression treaty, the Nkomati agreement, the South Africans promised to end these destabilisation tactics.

South Africa's deputy foreign minister, Louis Nel, admitted to me last week in Pretoria that his government had overestimated its capacity to control the MNR, which now has 2,000 insurgents investing the Mozambican capital, Maputo. Nel chairs the South Africa-Mozambique security commission, and is making another

bid to arrange a ceasefire with the guerrillas.

But the MNR seems confident that it can continue its civil war with the support of the secret airlift. It was arranged, say informants, by Evo Fernandes, the rebels' secretary-general; he was helped by Vali Mamede, president of the Muslim community in Portugal.

The C-130s make a refuelling stop in Mogadishu, Somalia. They were last seen there on 20 October. 'We in the trade know those planes and what they carry,' said a travel business source in Mogadishu.

The traffic in arms through the Comoros is thought to be linked with the arrest in Southern Tanzania at the end of August of four Portuguese, all former residents of Mozambique. Posing as big game hunters, they built camps and airstrips, which Tanzanian sources say were being used to shuttle arms into neighbouring Mozambique.

The Portuguese deputy prime minister, Mota Pinto, has been trying through diplomatic channels to obtain the release of his compatriots held in Tanzania. Significantly, Pinto is a close friend of Fernandes.

A key figure behind the financing of the airlift from the Middle East is believed to be Manuel Bulhosa, a 77-year-old Portuguese industrialist. He once had major investments in Mozambique, including an oil refinery, but all of them were nationalised at independence.

Bulhosa nominally employs Fernandes and another MNR leader, Jorge Correia, in his publishing house. On 23 October last month, both Bulhosa and Fernandes flew to Munich to meet Franz Josef Strauss, the Bavarian right-wing leader to seek his support for the MNR.

The connections between the guerrillas and Bavaria are not new. The MNR military commander, Afonso Dhakama,

flew to Munich last year to meet right-wing groups.

So despite the treaty between South Africa and Mozambique, the guerrilla movement has grown in strength and now poses a threat to the government in Maputo. At the Addis Ababa meeting of the Organisation of African Unity three weeks ago, President Machel had talks with the Prime Minister of the Comoros in a bid to end the airlift.

This may be too late. The MNR is well established on the ground, and it may now take a political accommodation to bring peace to Mozambique.