

Outgunned and unassisted, rag-tag rebels are winners

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The foreign editor of *The Times* spent two weeks traveling through Mozambique with anti-communist guerrillas. This is the first of three articles.

By Holger Jensen [Dec '86]
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GORONGOSA, Mozambique — Anti-communist guerrillas here think nothing of walking eight days through the African bush to engage their enemy in a 30-second firefight. Most of them have no shoes. Few

even have shirts. But they are well-armed with Soviet bloc weapons captured from the other side — and they appear to be winning. What makes it all the more remarkable is that they are doing it alone, without any help from their former South African allies or the West.

I traveled more than 300 miles through two provinces — by dugout canoe, on foot and small Japanese motorcycles — with insurgents of the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) and

spent four days with their leader, Afonso Dlakama.

We moved openly by day, even when making exposed river crossings, an indication that there is little danger from air attacks in the liberated zone.

Nowhere was there evidence of South African involvement. The arms, the ammunition, the canned food, medical supplies and scraps of uniform worn by the guerrillas all had been seized from the Mozam-

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bic army, FRELIMO, and its former backers.

Despite their haphazard appearance, the guerrillas turned out to be a disciplined military force, on good terms with the civilian population and firmly in control of the countryside. Some of their bases are only a few miles from government-held towns, and they possessed a vast arsenal of assault rifles, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns and even SAM-7 heat-seeking missiles.

Functioning schools, rudimentary hospitals and thriving agriculture were in evidence, with no sign of drought or starvation as claimed by the Marxist government in Maputo. Civilians in RENAMO-held areas appeared well-fed as they peacefully tended crops of maize, manioc, bananas, mangoes, chickens and livestock.

The war, such as it is, is being fought only on the outskirts of a few major towns still in government hands and along the Beira Corridor, a strategic supply route that links landlocked Zimbabwe to Mozambique's second largest port on the Indian Ocean.

Because it would lessen Zimbabwe's dependence on South African trade routes, making it less vulnerable to Pretoria's reprisals against sanctions. Maputo — and much of the rest of the world — sees RENAMO attacks on the Beira Corridor as being planned and assisted by South African commandos.

More recently, to cover up the embarrassing loss of five towns near

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the Malawi border — which fell in battles ranging from 30 seconds to 20 minutes — Maputo has accused that black African country of providing bases for the guerrillas.

But RENAMO has no external bases: Mr. Dlakama doesn't even have radio contact with the outside world. And he claims he has not had South African help since Pretoria and Maputo signed the Nkomati Accord in 1984, under which both countries agreed not to aid guerrillas opposing their respective governments.

Now 10 years old, the bush war in Mozambique is the most successful, and least recognized, anti-communist insurgency in the world today. It is the only battlefield where Soviet bloc forces have suffered such major reversals that Moscow is in imminent danger of losing one of its client states.

Mr. Dlakama, who calls himself the "president of Free Mozambique," claims to control 85 percent of the country — a land area approximately equivalent to Texas and Louisiana combined — and says he is already negotiating with some mem-

bers of the Maputo government who want his backing for a coup.

He speaks wistfully of getting American Stinger missiles, like his anti-communist counterpart in Angola, Jonas Savimbi, but confidently predicts victory without them — probably before the end of next year.

"The war is nearly over," Mr. Dlakama told me at a jungle base camp in Gorongosa National Park. "We have already begun the task of reconstruction."

If so, he has succeeded against staggering odds. RENAMO has only 22,000 armed guerrillas and 4,500 unarmed recruits. Arrayed against them, by Mr. Dlakama's count, are 25,000 FRELIMO soldiers and up to 53,500 reinforcements from seven foreign armies.

These include 25,000 Zimbabweans, 10,000 Tanzanians, 6,500 Ethiopians and 12,000 Soviet, East German, Cuban and North Korean advisers, artillery officers, pilots and naval personnel, many of them participating directly in combat.

Yet, despite total air superiority, FRELIMO and its allies are virtually under siege in the capital, a few other provincial centers and scattered military garrisons.

RENAMO has free run of all 10 provinces in Mozambique, enjoys a monopoly on the nation's food supply and the allegiance of most of its 15 million people. In fact, it already has established a civilian government that administers schools, medical clinics and agricultural programs in the liberated zone.

The only thing the guerrillas cannot do is hold on to large population centers that provide fixed targets for enemy MiGs and Hind helicopter gunships. But they seem able to take towns at will, stripping them of supplies and then abandoning them to the ever-encroaching bush.

In contrast, Nicaragua's American-backed resistance fighters seem years away from making similar gains. The Afghan Mujahideen are doing better against Soviet occupation forces in their country, but the situation there can best be described as a stalemate. And Mr. Savimbi's UNITA rebels are only now beginning to expand their zone of influence beyond Angola's southern provinces, thanks to U.S. missile deliveries and direct military intervention by the South African army and air force.

This raises questions about U.S. policy in the minds of some observers in southern Africa. Although the Reagan Doctrine has produced assistance to other guerrilla armies fighting communist governments, the United States is underwriting the Soviet war effort in Mozambique by providing aid to the Maputo government.

Washington has given FRELIMO \$70 million since 1985 and plans to donate another \$25 million next year.

It is also eyeing an ambitious development plan for the Beira Corridor, now being studied by the World Bank, that envisions an expenditure of \$600 million over the next 10 years.

If RENAMO ceases its attacks in the Beira Corridor long enough for the project to become reality, it will directly benefit the Marxist, and virulently anti-American, government of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe.

For this reason, some American aid planners favor an alternative development project at the seaport of Nacala, which has a rail link to friendly, pro-Western Malawi. The only flaw in their logic is that Nacala happens to be a Soviet naval base with a large contingent of Tanzanian troops and Cuban advisers.

The United States is not the only Western government assisting Maputo. The Scandinavians, the Netherlands, Portugal, France and Great Britain also are prospective investors in the Beira Corridor. Margaret Thatcher's conservative government is even thinking of sending British Special Air Services (SAS) instructors to train FRELIMO spe-

cial forces to do a better job of guarding it.

Western economic aid enables the Soviet bloc to concentrate on military assistance. So far, East Germany has been Moscow's only ally to offer anything for the Beira Corridor project, and then only \$3 million.

Mr. Dlakama says the West has been hoodwinked by Maputo's propaganda, which characterizes FRELIMO as a rag-tag bunch of "bandits" with unsavory links to white colonial regimes. But he concedes that he himself is partly at fault for not launching a diplomatic offensive abroad.

It was only recently that FRELIMO opened a "Mozambique Information Office" in Washington, and communications with it are still sporadic.

Mr. Dlakama sees the United States as a natural ally, misled by FRELIMO promises to institute Western-style economic reforms. But he no longer trusts the South Africans, even though they have a mutual interest in shutting down the Beira Corridor.

Although the Nkomati Accord has all but collapsed in recriminations about Samora Machel's death and Maputo's continued support of the outlawed African National Congress, Mr. Dlakama does not envision another alliance with Pretoria.

"They are benefiting from our operations in the Beira Corridor," he said, "but they are still providing aid and technical assistance to our enemies in Maputo. So our interests do not always coincide."

Tomorrow: Journey through the liberated zone.