

MNR war reaches critical stage

From David Beresford
in Maputo

A CRITICAL stage has been reached in the anti-apartheid struggle — both for the international community and "black Africa" — in Mozambique's war with the rebel forces of the MNR.

The Frelimo Government, under the new leadership of President Joaquim Chissano, is engaged in a military and diplomatic offensive against the South African-backed rebels, which threatens to precipitate a new escalation in the conflict.

Senior government sources confirmed at the weekend that Tanzanian troops were being brought into the country as part of the counter-offensive, joining several thousand Zimbabwean troops already stationed here.

The Chief of Staff, Sebastião Mabote, has already been replaced by the political commissar of the armed forces, Mr Armando Pangene, who is conducting the

new initiative. The appointment, which has not been publicly announced, is expected to have a considerable impact on the organisation of the army.

The counter offensive is in response to incursions into Mozambique's northern provinces by MNR forces from neighbouring Malawi. It is being coupled with heavy pressure by the Frelimo Government on Malawi to shut down MNR bases on their territory as well as to start using Mozambique, rather than South African transport routes.

Weekend reports in Maputo claimed that Malawi had agreed to cooperate with Mozambique, at a meeting of a joint security commission set up by the two countries.

This follows disclosures by South Africa—based on state documents recovered from the Machel air crash—that the Frontline states were considering drastic steps against Malawi, including closure of

its borders and possible military action to destroy bridges on its transport routes to Zambia and Tanzania.

The concerted action against the MNR and Malawi now raises questions about the South Africans' response, which could be crucial to that country's survival in the face of the international sanctions drive.

The Mozambique Government believes that Pretoria is now airlifting supplies to rebels in the north. Reported sightings of submarines in the Mozambique channel has also given some support to speculation that they may be landing weapons by sea.

Fears in Maputo are that the MNR, with South African encouragement, is now going for the overthrow of the Frelimo Government in an effort to secure the country's support for sanction busting operations. The fears are encouraged by an apparent switch in MNR tactics—from mere destabilisation of the economy, to operations de-

signed to establish control over territory—in their incursions from Malawi, which developed from late September.

The MNR offensive has been concentrated on the province of Zambezia and, to a lesser extent, on Tete province, which are geographically divided by Malawi. Although information on the development of the conflict is scarce — partly because of poor communications in Mozambique — it is believed that the rebels control most of the towns in Zambezia, with the exceptions of the provincial capital, Quelimane, the provincial military headquarters at Mocuba, and the small port of Chinde which is packed with refugees.

The war has had a devastating impact on Zambezia which was once responsible — with its tea, coconut, and other plantations — for more than half the country's foreign earnings. Its destabilisation by the MNR has made a major contribution to the collapse in the country's foreign earnings, from about \$250 million in 1980 to less than \$50 million last year.

It is expected that the MNR will try to drive on south to attack the "Beira corridor," the road and rail link between Mutare and Zimabwe and the port of Beira. Efforts to keep this corridor open have become a symbol of collaboration between the Frontline states in what they see as a direct struggle with South Africa.

Most of Zimbabwe's troops in Mozambique — now believed to number over 10,000 — are deployed along the corridor. It is assumed that the Tanzanian reinforcements will be used against the MNR further north.

The stakes for the Frontline states in the Mozambique struggle are extremely high. For landlocked Zimbabwe in particular, the collapse of the Frelimo Government would make it entirely reliant on South Africa for survival. The close identification of interests between the two countries explains President Chissano's vague references recently to the prospect of some political union eventually developing between them.

But despite the crucial nature of the struggle, and the Mozambique Government's commitment to "Marxist-Leninism and proletarian internationalism," there is no suggestion that the country could follow Angola's example and bring in Soviet bloc, or Cuban troops for support.

There are Soviet and East German military advisers in the country and arms supplies are being received from them, but the Government appears determined to limit the use of foreign forces to African states, or at least members of the non-aligned movement. There are reports circulating in government circles here that India may be sending frigates to patrol the Mozambique channel.