

Mozambique Rebels Aid Pretoria's Cause

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From Casa Banana, his headquarters deep in the Mozambique bush, guerrilla leader Afonso Dhlakama has become one of the key players in the international sanctions war against South Africa.

Mr. Dhlakama, the 33-year-old leader of the Mozambique National Resistance, or Renamo, is a chubby, bespectacled man who gave up his accounting studies for guerrilla warfare more than a decade ago. He and his 22,000 rebels are fighting to overthrow Mozambique's tottering Marxist government, which has been further weakened by the recent death of its first president, Samora Machel.

But Renamo also is engaged in a broader struggle against all of black southern Africa that is interfering with international sanctions meant to seal off South Africa.

Claims Don't Ring True

Claiming that it is a black nationalist movement that has no sympathy for the white minority government in Pretoria, Renamo denies that it receives military aid from South Africa. But the fact that Renamo's actions play into Pretoria's hands, as well as a history of South African contacts with the guerrillas, have much of the world believing otherwise.

Renamo controls most of the Mozambique countryside, and has been able almost at will to attack the oil pipeline, railway, roads and Indian Ocean port that make up the Beira Corridor. Were it free from guerrilla attack, the Beira Corridor could provide black southern African countries with an alternative to the present practice of moving the bulk of their trade through South Africa. So important is this route in isolating South Africa that the U.S. and several European countries have considered coupling their own sanctions against Pretoria with an aid package to upgrade the carrying capacity of the corridor and keep Beira open.

A stable and upgraded Beira Corridor would enable the so-called frontline states, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Zaire, Malawi and Botswana, to reduce their dependence on South Africa and impose economic sanctions on Pretoria. But if Renamo continues to blow up the pipeline and railway and hijack trucks, South Africa will retain its intimidating position.

"Renamo can render the Beira Corridor so insecure that it won't function," says Andre Thomashausen, a law professor and Renamo analyst at the University of South Africa in Pretoria.

Black States Trapped

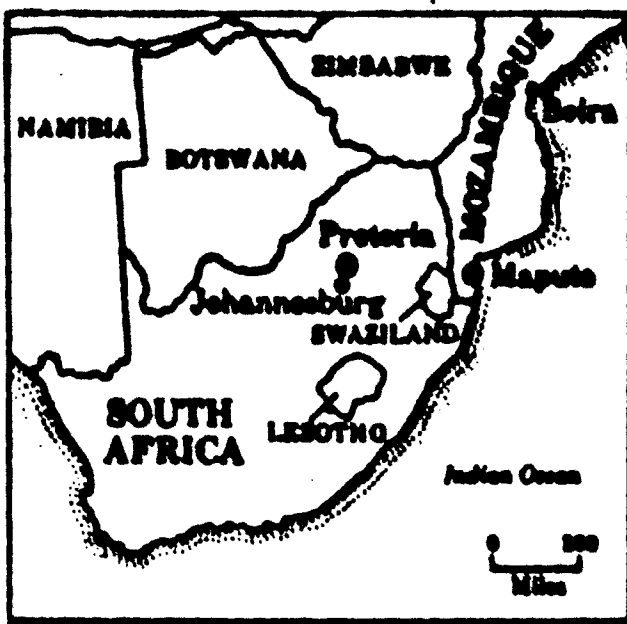
And without a functioning Beira Corridor, the black states of southern Africa are trapped. Zimbabwe, which has been making the loudest noises about imposing sanctions against Pretoria and would be the hardest hit by any countersanctions, has recently been forced to turn to South Africa for tons of fuel because of supply disruptions in the Beira Corridor. About 90% of Zimbabwe's foreign trade passes through South Africa; it is about 50% for Zambia, Zaire and Malawi.

Despite the advantages for South Africa of continued Renamo successes, Pretoria stridently denies that it aids the rebels. Indeed, it says it wants to improve economic ties with the Mozambique government, now headed by Joaquim Chissano. Besides, says a Foreign Ministry official, "Renamo isn't hard up for financial help. It has a hard time using up what it has."

The Mozambique National Resistance initially was nurtured by security forces in neighboring white-ruled Rhodesia. But when black rule came to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa became the main supplier of arms and training, Western diplomats say. On occasion, South Africa's deputy foreign minister flew to the Mozambique bush to meet with the rebels.

In early 1984, South Africa signed an accord with Mozambique promising to halt its support to the rebels. While Renamo offices in South Africa were closed, the suspicion of continued aid to the rebels hasn't diminished. President Chissano last week accused South Africa of airdropping supplies to Renamo.

Today, diplomats and analysts of the Mozambique war say, Renamo is so strong, compared with the ragged government troops, that it could continue its fight without outside aid. In recent months, the rebels have captured several cities in the north and made occasional forays into Maputo, the capital. Last year one siege of Maputo was so tight that President Machel slept at night on a yacht several miles offshore, according to press reports.



Because of Mozambique's economic crisis, government soldiers are poorly clothed and fed and, despite the assistance of Soviet bloc advisers, badly trained.

The Renamo guerrillas are also badly clothed, but they feed off the land, which they control, and they claim to have captured big reserves of Soviet-made arms from government troops.

Mr. Dhlakama, who was educated in a Roman Catholic missionary school, says he wants free elections in Mozambique and respect for human rights. But, despite such talk, and the stories about Renamo soldiers carrying Bibles, the rebels have a reputation for banditry. The government says Renamo's tactics include random attacks on civilian buses, kidnapping and cutting off the noses and ears of peasants who cooperate with the government or resist joining the rebels.

Renamo charges the government with religious persecution and with imprisoning opponents in "reeducation camps." One way Renamo built up its support initially was by running a radio service that informed people about government wrongdoers.

Strategy for Day After

Mr. Dhlakama, the son of a tribal chief, talks about victory within two years. "Ultimately, Renamo could win the war, it could storm the presidential palace," says Mr. Thomashausen. "But it won't unless it had a strategy for the day after."

So far, such a strategy hasn't emerged. Mr. Dhlakama is said to be interested in pushing for a reconciliation with the government because he realizes there isn't enough expertise within Renamo to run a government by itself. And without a reconciliation, the government troops might take to the bush and continue the war.

Sources say Mr. Dhlakama also realizes that governing the country would be nearly impossible without international support, which has so far been denied because of his group's ties to South Africa and because the international community recognizes the government.

Mr. Dhlakama is said to be jealous of Jonas Savimbi, the high-profile leader of the anticommunist guerrillas in Angola who is received by leaders around the world. As a result, Mr. Dhlakama is trying to spruce up his image: his eyeglasses, worn to make him look older, are said to be only window glass, and he is studying English and listening to the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corp.

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