

Elsewhere in the country,

Renamo consists of rag-tag, hit-and-run gangs. But in Zambezia, well-drilled Renamo troops operate at battalion strength. KARL MAIER reports from Quelimane

# IN RENAMO'S BASTION

JUST five months after rightist rebels were threatening to slice Mozambique in two, government forces, backed by Zimbabwean and Tanzanian troops, have regained control of most of the lower Zambezi River valley for the first time in two years.

In a two-pronged offensive, Frelimo is driving west against rebel strongholds along the north bank of the Zambezi River, while Zimbabwean troops have recaptured several key towns on the south bank.

The apparent goal is to pin the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo) against the border with Malawi and put government forces in position to strike rebel bases in the western part of Zambezia province later this year. The outcome could hang on Malawi honouring its December 18 commitment to help Mozambique wipe out the rebels.

The situation in the northwestern province of Tete, however, is worsening, with the government having lost effective control north of the Zambezi River. Attacks on the Zimbabwean-run military convoy to Malawi have increased in recent weeks.

The 20 000-strong Renamo has its most effective troops in Zambezia, which has been the centre of guerrilla operations since Zimbabwean troops overran the Casa Banana headquarters two years ago. Unlike the rag-tag gangs that prey on poorly defended villages in much of the rest of Mozambique, Renamo moves in battalion strength in this province.

Eyewitness accounts suggest Renamo troops in Zambezia are well-armed, have good logistical support, and have some civilian supporters. When the guerrillas burned down five tea plantations last month near Gurue, about 300km northwest of here, they were told Frelimo was away on operations and handed the identities of local officials and militiamen, who were summarily executed.

"Who gives this information to Renamo? The public," says AS Solomon, a 46-year-old Indian plantation manager who was held by Renamo for three days. He characterised Renamo as a fairly disciplined force, with ample supplies of rifles, bazookas, and radios, and said he was awakened each morning by Renamo troops drilling in formation. "They are real Mozambicans," he said, noting that the guerrillas spoke the local language. That suggests Frelimo faces a huge task in routing the rebels from Zambezia.

But Solomon's chronicle of rape, civilian murders and theft mocks Renamo's claims to be fighting for the "liberation" of Mozambique.

Frelimo launched the current offensive just a month after President Samora Machel died on October 19 in a still unexplained air crash in South Africa. It came as his successor, President Joaquim Chissano, was in a crucial battle to reform the army, which has been riddled with charges of incompetence and corruption. The shakeup has replaced Col-general Sebastiao Mabote as chief of staff with Lieut-general Armando Panguene.

The first task in Zambezia was to blunt an expected Renamo dash to take Quelimane, a major port and a possible key supply route, and the smaller coastal towns of Chinde and Pebane. Chissano, in a recent interview, said Mozambique had thwarted a South African attempt to resupply the rebels by sea in January, and the guerrillas briefly occupied Pebane on January 2.

At the same time, the government opened the province's transport artery — the road between the provincial capital of Quelimane and Mocuba, site of the Zambezia military command. Most of the province's roads remain impassable, however.

Frelimo is now in the critical phase, tackling the north bank of the Zambezi, an area which many government supporters had given up for lost.

Using aged MiG jet bombers and the powerful MI-24 Hind helicopters, Frelimo, under the command of Major-general Hama Thai, took the towns of Luabo and Mopeia on March 10 in a three-day operation. Luabo, just



The end of the war has come for this terrified Renamo soldier, paraded through the streets of Chimboia in the Beira corridor by the gleeful militiamen who captured him. Villagers, their hatred fuelled by years of savage Renamo attacks, gather in the streets to taunt and cuff this symbol of their own suffering

Picture: GIDEON MENDEL

## A leg lost, a husband too

By VIVIENNE WALT

"THE bandits came asking about my husband, because he was part of the *grupo dinamizador* (the district party leadership of Frelimo)," said Luisa Alberto, 29. "But they escaped. So they said I must be punished instead." During the attack on her home near Inhambane, north of Maputo, last month, the group of Renamo fighters dragged her outside and set upon her with machetes, she said.

Last week, Alberto's right leg, repeatedly hacked by the guerrillas

during her abduction, was amputated at the knee.

Lying in Maputo's Central Hospital, a locket of floral embroidery around her neck, Alberto said her 14-month-old son died while she was away. "There was no one to feed him or look after him," she said.

Now she fears her husband will reject her because she has been made an invalid and lost their child. "He has not written or visited. I would rather stay with my brother when I leave the hospital," she said.

50km from the Indian Ocean, had been considered a major Renamo resupply depot since the guerrillas captured the town in mid-1985.

The victories followed by one month the two-day assault on Mutarara and four other river towns just below the Malawi border by the Zimbabwe airforce and elite paratroopers.

The big prize of the operation was one of Africa's longest rail bridges that links the central province of Sofala and the northwestern province of Tete. The railway itself is the key to reopening the giant coalfields in Moatize that could earn Mozambique R50-million a year in foreign exchange. Since the early 1980s, however, Renamo attacks have rendered the

line, and thus the mine, useless.

The Mutarara assault also signalled a new, more aggressive mood in the Zimbabwean military high command, which in the past has been chary of deepening its involvement in the Mozambican war while the government army remained humbled by disorganisation and horrific logistics problems.

But Renamo's spectacular gains in Tete and Zambezia last year and Machel's death apparently convinced Zimbabwean commander Lieut-general Rex Nkhongu that he would have to send his army further afield from its base camps along the Beira corridor — the rail, oil pipeline and road system that is vital to Zimbabwe's foreign trade and is guarded by

6 000 Zimbabwean troops.

The apparent turnaround in the attitude of the Hastings Banda government in Malawi could also be a major blow to Renamo.

Last year Frontline states accused Malawi of "complicity" in what they called South Africa's "terrorist campaign" against Mozambique. Machel had threatened to station missiles on Malawi's border if it continued to allow the rebels to operate from its territory.

Now, says Chissano, "Malawi is at our side, and we are cooperating in the fight against the bandits."

Reports indicate that Mozambique and Zimbabwe troops will be allowed to operate against Renamo in Malawi. In Lisbon, yesterday, Renamo warned they would "suffer the consequences" and "pay a high price" for sending soldiers to defend the northern railway to Nacala.

In Zambezia, the much ridiculed government army is showing signs of a new assertiveness, and the specially trained "red beret" commandos are working to counter the notion that the Frelimo army would rather run than fight.

Still, it is difficult to judge how much ground fighting is actually taking place in the Zambezia offensive, given Frelimo's reliance on jet bombers and helicopter gunships.

Probably not very much, says Colonel Mike Bowden, the British army attaché in Beira and Maputo. "If you move a lot of troops in and get some outside help," he says, "Renamo are not the kind of people who are going to stand and fight."