

Guns of Zambezia

Everybody has a finger in the pie.

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 north-western 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 rebel 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 rebels burned down five tea plantations in February near Gurue, about 300 kilometres north-west of Quelimane, they were informed that Frelimo was away on operations and were provided with the identities of local officials and militiamen, who were summarily executed.

"Who gives this information to Renamo?" "The public", says A S Solomon, a 46-year-old Indian plantation manager who was held by Renamo for three days.

He characterised Renamo as fairly disciplined militarily, with ample supplies of automatic rifles, bazookas, 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 mock Renamo's claims to be fighting for the 'liberation' of Mozambique.

Frelimo launched the current offensive just a month after President Samora Machel died in a still unexplained air crash in South Africa on October 19.

It came as President Joaquim Chissano was involved in a crucial battle to

Chissano: *aluta continua*



reform the army, which has been riddled with charges of incompetence and corruption. The shakeup has replaced Col. Gen. Sebastiao Mabote as chief of staff with Lt.Gen. Armando Panguene.

The first task in Zambezia was to blunt an expected Renamo dash to take Quelimane, a major port and potential 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, with the support of a battalion of Tanzanian troops, 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 impassible, however.

Frelimo is now in the critical phase, tackling the north bank of the Zambezia, 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 Commander of Maj-Gen. Hama Thai, took the towns of Luabo and Mopeia on March 10 in a three-day operation. Luabo, just 35 miles from the Indian Ocean, had been considered a major Renamo resupply depot since the guerrillas captured the town in mid-1985.

The victories followed the two-day

assault in February by the Zimbabwe air force and elite paratroopers in Mutarara and four other river towns just below the Malawi border. The big prize of the operation was one of Africa's longest rail bridges that links the central province of Sofala and the north-western province of Tete.

The railway itself is the key to reopening the giant coal fields in Moatize which could earn Mozambique millions of dollars 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 Lt-Gen Tapfumaneyi Mujuru (formerly known as Rex Nhongo) 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 President Kamuzu Banda's government in Malawi, which juts down into the heart of Mozambique,

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." Military sources indicate that Mozambican and Zimbabwean troops are being allowed to operate against Renamo in Malawi. Units of Malawi's inexperienced 5,000-strong army are also helping to defend the northern Nacala railway, which Lilongwe prizes as an export route.

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 Col. Mike Bowden, the British military attache to Harare 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." ●

Karl Maier