

TIDE TURNS AGAINST MNR

Malawi has surprised the frontline states by at last giving military aid to Mozambique. **Maggie Jonas** reports on the latest developments in the war-ridden country, looks into the history of the conflict and assesses the strength of the MNR.

MOZAMBIQUE has gained an important ally in its fight against the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR). It has at last got the agreement of Malawi – until recently an important base for the rebels – to join Zimbabwe and Tanzania in providing troops to fight the MNR. President Hastings Banda said in late March that he was sending 300 soldiers from his 5,000 strong army into Mozambique in early April.

They are expected to be deployed on the strategic railway line from Malawi to the Indian Ocean port of Nacala, which was closed in 1984 after MNR sabotage. SADCC has made its repair a priority, and the Nacala-Nampula link is now functioning. The remainder of the route is being repaired with European funding worth about \$100 million.

Malawi is the only southern African country to maintain diplomatic links with South Africa, and its change of heart was not exactly voluntary. Back in September 1986, the leaders of Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique confronted Banda with complicity with South Africa by providing protection for the MNR. They threatened to train missiles against the alleged MNR bases if the MNR was not expelled. But the strongest sanction, which Malawi bit, was the threat of blockading the entirely-landlocked country.

Bridge captured

The other most recent important victory for Mozambique was the capture of the Mutarara railway bridge in February by the Zimbabwean forces. The bridge crosses the Zambezi into Malawi, and the operation was counted as the biggest against the rebels in a year. Five key towns were retaken during the onslaught. The MNR is presently most active in north-western Zambesia (it holds four districts now, compared with virtually the entire province in February); north-east Tete, central Niassa, Nampula and northern Sofala. Attacks around Maputo, the economic and political pulse of the country, and the strategic Beira corridor to Zimbabwe

continue intermittently.

India has provided a small naval presence in Mozambican waters since February in a bid to thwart South African resupply by sea of MNR rebels. The question of resupply is now a critical one for the MNR, having lost its safe hinterland in Malawi. Earlier in the year, an MNR attempt to take Pebane on the Zambezia coast was foiled; this was believed to be an attempt to form a bridgehead for resupply by South Africa by sea.

Mozambique's army, which is about 45,000 strong, has British-trained officers. Most of its weapons are supplied by the Eastern bloc. Zimbabwe has moved in some 12,000 troops and there are an unknown number of Tanzanian troops. MNR head Afonso Dhlakama recently told a Western journalist his force was 25,000 strong. Some of the rebels are white Portuguese, Afrikaans and English speakers with South African accents, say captors. Many are well-trained and armed.

The MNR's speciality is sabotage of economic targets to create maximum disruption, and the use of intimidation through violence. Reports abound of rape

and slaughter of villagers who refuse the MNR food. Health workers, teachers and other agents of development are targeted. Important economic installations have been shut down or blown up. The country's exports have thus been reduced from \$260 million in 1980 to a mere \$80 million in 1986.

Yet for all the efficacy of its campaign, the MNR remains a shadowy body with a profile so low that few people abroad can claim to know what its aims are. It has never made known any defined policies, although right-wing groups like the US-based Heritage Foundation are presently attempting to provide the MNR with a policy and thus a respectable face. There are intense power struggles within the leadership and there has been "a lot of political wheeling and dealing among officials", according to the anti-Frelimo Lisbon-based monthly, *África Confidencial*.

The MNR appears to have a well-organised core but also includes an unknown number of freewheeling bandits who work in small groups stealing to survive, and who have found stealing an easier life than tilling the soil. Yet others have been press-ganged. Survivors report that villagers are forced to kill their own relatives, then told they have no choice but to join up because they can no longer return home. Foreign aid officials told me they found no-one who supported the MNR, although many have become so disillusioned and desperate they have no dedication to the Frelimo government either.

A Lisbon-based journalist, Sharon Behn, reported in late March that villagers she met with Dhlakama behind rebel lines supported the MNR because they didn't like the communal farms the socialist

A Mozambican army column leaves to search for the MNR in the bush





A convoy to Zimbabwe from Mozambique prepares to run the MNR gauntlet

government tried to implement. She even suggests the MNR controls 85 per cent of the country, figures described as impossibly high by other sources. If people in MNR territory are so happy, how come they're fleeing at the rate of 1-200 a month in Zambezia? asks one aid official *New African* spoke to.

The roots of the MNR are found among elements of the Portuguese colonial army who fled to Rhodesia when Frelimo took power in 1975. They had worked as collaborators for the Portuguese in the notorious commando units and secret police, and felt they had reason to fear an independent Mozambique. Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation head, Ken Flowers, is credited with founding the proto-MNR, according to documents opened after Zimbabwean independence.

Rhodesian relationship

The Frelimo government took up sanctions against Rhodesia immediately it came to power, and Rhodesia began using the dissaffected Mozambican and Portuguese elements to attack Zanu and Zanu. After black majority rule, the role of sponsoring the MNR was taken over by South Africa. During the transition to black rule, South Africa airlifted the MNR soldiers from one of the assembly points set up by the British to camps in north Transvaal – apparently without being spotted. The camps were disguised as disused mines, according to Rhodesian files. The flood of Portuguese settlers from Mozambique to South Africa ensured a ready back-up of funds, and by 1981 there is

clear evidence that the rebels were infiltrating Mozambique.

The tactic now is to maintain Frelimo in a perpetual state of weakness, as South Africa is doing throughout the frontline states. Why did South Africa feel threatened by Mozambique? It posed an ideological threat to apartheid and South Africa needed to show its people that blacks were not capable of running their own affairs, says Mozambique Information Office representative in London, Dot Keet.

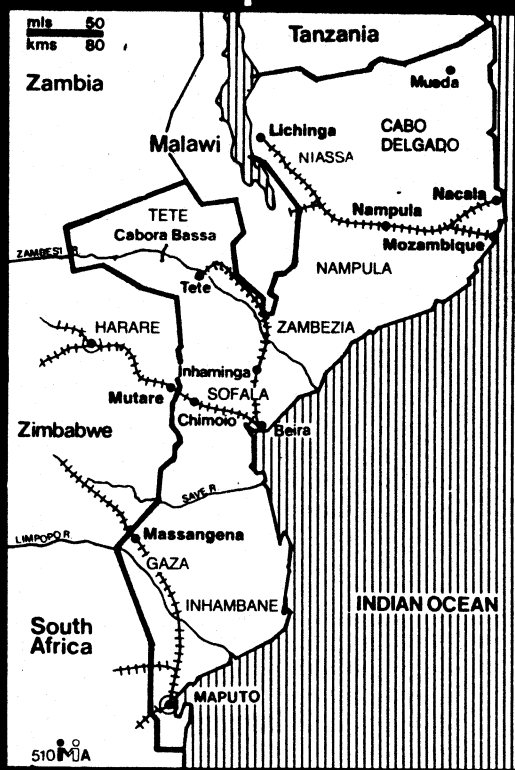
But South Africa was also embroiled in its own troubles and accused Mozambique of harbouring ANC fighters – something Mozambique has always denied. In 1983, South Africa stopped using Mozambican ports and railways – thus depriving it of taxes and dues, and cut back on the number of miners working in the country.

In 1984 it finally signed the Nkomati non-aggression accord with Mozambique, although it became clear within a few months that South Africa had no intention of keeping to the agreement. Its planes and boats were seen landing men and arms in Mozambique. By 1985, Manica and Sofala were permeated with bandits.

Mozambique's greatest victory, which it used to draw the rest of the world's attention to its plight, was the capture of the logistical backbone of the MNR in the Gorongosa hills in August 1985. While South Africa had denied aiding the MNR, here was proof in the massive communications system, weapons store and landing strip. Equipment bore South African post-Nkomati date stamps – there was no doubt of South Africa's intentions now.

By 1986 it became clear that South Africa

Mozambique



The map shows Mozambique regions. The MNR is particularly strong in Tete and the North

had transferred into Malawi the bandits who escaped from Gorongosa, from where they raided Niassa, Tete, and the particularly food- and mineral-rich province of Zambezia, drastically hitting Mozambique's foreign exchange earning capacity.

In September 1986, following the frontline states' confrontation with Malawi, huge waves of bandits crossed from Malawi into Tete province, which witnessed mass attacks. Immediately South Africa retaliated by threatening to expell 60,000 miners – a severe blow to Mozambique's economy, to which miners' remittances are vital.

War effort

Observers comment that the government's war effort is going well at present, although they dare not sound too optimistic, fearing the MNR could just as quickly set up base in another area. Anne Lloyd-Williams, an Oxfam official back from north Mozambique in late March, commented that there was an air of hopefulness in Maputo and greater confidence that the fighting is winnable. The government cautiously says it is making headway. By April it had 310 trucks to distribute the emergency food at last arriving in the country to feed the hungry and destitute victims of war. ■