

MNR murders strain

SA-Malawi links ^{The Herald} (Harare) 10/6/87.

By a Special Correspondent in Maputo
MALAWI'S normally warm relations with South Africa have sharply deteriorated as a result of the deaths of a number of Malawian soldiers and civilian railway workers inside Mozambique.

On May 25 a group of over 100 South African - backed Mozambique National Resistance bandits attacked a gang of Malawian railway workers and their combined Malawi and Mozambique army guard force near the town of Malema 150 kilometres inside Mozambique.

In the battle, four Malawian and seven Mozambican soldiers were killed. In addition, five Malawian railway

workers, including three engineers, died and 17 were wounded. An unknown number of MNR bandits were killed and wounded.

These are the first Malawian military deaths inside Mozambique since Malawi committed troops in April to protecting the strategic railway to the Mozambican Indian Ocean port of Nacala. The number of Malawian troops now inside Mozambique is put at between 400 and 500.

Malawi, the only African country to have diplomatic relations with South Africa, called in the South African military attache at the embassy in Lilongwe to make a strongly-worded formal protest over the incident, diplo-

matic sources say.

The railway to the deepwater port of Nacala is by far Malawi's shortest and cheapest route to the sea. But it has been closed for over three years as a result of MNR sabotage. Malawi, in common with other landlocked countries in the region, has been forced to spend many millions of extra pounds on freight bills putting its trade through South Africa's ports and railways.

In addition to the Malawian commitment to protecting the Nacala route, Mozambican officials say that last year Lonrho's chief executive, Mr "Tiny" Rowland, loaned the government over US\$4 million to train and equip a 600-strong special force to protect

the route. They are being trained in Mozambique by former members of the British Special Air Service (SAS) regiment. Lonrho has extensive business interests in Malawi.

Diplomatic sources point out the irony of Malawi's commitment in Mozambique today and the resulting deterioration in its relations with South Africa.

Malawi's octogenarian leader, Dr Kamuzu Banda, has long laid claim to all of Mozambique north of the Zambezi River. During the past 25 years he has supported a number of groups opposed to Mozambique's ruling Frelimo

party.

Last year, just before his death in a mysterious plane crash in South Africa, Mozambique's late president, Samora Machel, threatened to put missiles on his border with Malawi and economically blockade that country if it did not cease providing a rear base for the MNR.

Malawi responded by ejecting thousands of MNR bandits into Mozambique in an invasion which for some weeks threatened the centre-north of the country. This resulted in Tanzania committing troops to the centre-north. Zimbabwe had earlier committed several thousand troops further south.

Since those traumatic events late last year the military situation has greatly improved, as have relations between Malawi and Mozambique, who have signed a joint security pact.

Given Malawi's vulnerability, many of Dr Banda's senior officials have long argued that the only sensible policy was to improve relations with Mozambique and other countries in the region and rehabilitate and secure the Nacala route.

The deaths of the Malawian soldiers and railway workers inside Mozambique is likely to be only the first in a series of incidents on the Nacala route leading to further deterioration in relations between Lilongwe and Pretoria.