

Pretoria's MNR surrogates massacre 386 civilians

By PAUL FAUVET
Special to the Guardian

MAPUTO—In the bloodiest single incident yet in South Africa's undeclared war against Mozambique, the apartheid regime's surrogates of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) massacred 386 civilians in the southern town of Homoine on July 18.

The killing was quite indiscriminate as the raiders smashed their way through the town. "We've come to finish off the people of Samora Machel," survivors heard the attackers shout. Machel, Mozambique's first president, died in a suspicious plane crash in South Africa last October.

The most repugnant scenes took place in the Homoine hospital, where the MNR systematically murdered patients in their beds. Even pregnant women and newborn babies in the maternity ward were not spared.

The Mozambican armed forces were evidently taken completely by surprise. The rebel force, several hundred strong, outnumbered

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the Homoine garrison, and it was some 10 hours before the army could mount a counterattack and drive the MNR out of the town.

As they withdrew, the MNR took some Homoine residents with them, but killed many of these just outside the town. By the end of the day there were 380 corpses lying in the streets of Homoine and in the surrounding area. Some 80 people were wounded, and over the next three days six died of their injuries. The MNR shot some of their victims to death, clubbed others, but apparently the most common form of murder was with knives or bayonets.

One eyewitness to the massacre was a U.S.

citizen, Mark Van Koevering, an agronomist from Michigan. He is a member of the Mennonite church and was working with the Christian Council of Mozambique on a seed multiplication project at Homoine.

Van Koevering was a guest at the Homoine Hotel, and survived by hiding in an abandoned room beside the hotel bathroom. Twice gunmen entered the bathroom, and through the thin partition he could hear them firing shots inside the bathroom. Van Koevering told Mozambican journalists that the raiders were "bandits who came in with the intent of killing people. Having lived through this," he continued, "I think it's important, especially for Americans, to realize that this is not a civil war. These people are not fighting for any ideal. They're fighting to create terror." Van Koevering attacked those members of Congress who are trying to push the U.S. administration into supporting the MNR. "The argument that people like Mr. Helms [Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C.] offer that this is a democratic movement to liberate the people of Mozambique is complete foolishness," he declared.

Fionna Douglas is an Australian freelance filmmaker who reached Homoine on July 20, in time to film harrowing scenes of distress at the funerals of some of the victims. "People were extremely distraught," she said. "A woman was trying to throw herself into the grave where her husband was being buried." Some of the coffins, noted Douglas, "were very small. One was about two feet long."

In the center of the town, Douglas saw "bloodstains all over. There was a big pool of blood opposite the hotel."

The MNR's spokesman in Lisbon, Paulo Oliveira, denied that his organization was responsible for the slaughter. He first tried to blame the Mozambican army, and then changed his story, inventing a mutiny by militia men. Why the militia, who are recruited from the local community, should turn against their neighbors and friends, he did not bother to explain. Oliveira is not Mozambican at all, but a Portuguese fascist.

Mozambique's top leadership, the Frelimo Political Bureau, declared that the South African government, as "the mentor of armed banditry" (the standard Mozambican term for MNR activity) was responsible for the massacre. The MNR, declared the Politbureau statement, "is nothing more than an operational extension of the South African armed forces." This drew a furious response from South African Foreign Minister Roelof Botha, who denied any involvement by Pretoria in the killings. Pretoria sent an arrogant protest note to Mozambique via its trade mission in



Young victim of an earlier MNR attack: 'This is not a civil war. . . They're fighting to create terror'

Maputo.

Yet South African responsibility is evident. Over the past three months there has been increased MNR infiltration over the South African border, landings of rebel reinforcements on the southern Mozambican coast and air-drops of supplies for MNR units in Inhambane province, where Homoine is located.

SOUTH AFRICA DENIES EVIDENCE

South Africa has denied all this. Unfortunately for their tattered credibility, Mozambican divers were able to recover three of the parachutes used for the Inhambane airdrop, which had fallen into a small lake. These are massive parachutes, of U.S. manufacture, some 32 yards in diameter, and capable of carrying loads of 3000 pounds. Pretoria's denials carry no conviction—who else would be using such enormous parachutes on clandestine operations in southern Mozambique?

Pretoria seems to have made a conscious decision to switch the main focus of the war to the south, following setbacks suffered by the MNR in central Mozambique earlier this year.

In February and March, Mozambican troops, with their Zimbabwean and Tanzanian military allies, recaptured most of the small towns in Zambezia and Sofala provinces occupied by the MNR in late 1986. This reestablished government control over the lower Zambezi valley, and effectively ended South Africa's hopes of cutting Mozambique in two along the line of the Zambezi river.

In response, South Africa has revived the MNR's southern front. Inhambane and Gaza provinces had been relatively calm throughout 1984-86. Now they are a battlefield again, and the Homoine massacre is the most dramatic example of this.

More of the same is threatened. Marcos Naene, one of those kidnaped at Homoine, but who managed to escape in a clash between the MNR and pursuing Mozambican troops the following day, said his captors had boasted that "Homoine is just the start."

The MNR had freed Naene from Homoine prison where he was serving a jail sentence, but he told journalists that he would "rather go back to prison than stay with the bandits." ■