

Zimbabwe's fighting elite

6 Brigade must win the war against South African-backed rebels, but can it? Karl Maier reports from Matabeleland

Alongside his wife and teenage son, Colonel Lionel Dyck stood erect, tapping out the martial beat of a song called "Warrior With A Silver Sword" as thousands of Zimbabwean infantrymen strutted by.

After 53 weeks of training, last weekend Zimbabwe's elite 6 Brigade was having its passing out parade. On display were the 5,883 young men who had beaten 77,000 other applicants for a place. Their stern faces hinted at the vigour of training by their teacher, Col Dyck, a former Rhodesian paratrooper, who has honed his skills in courses with American Special Forces at Fort Bragg, Georgia. "These are the best soldiers I have seen in this country since 1962," he boasted. "They are a pack of wild dogs looking for a fight."

They will not have to look far. The 6 Brigade is scheduled to operate both in Mozambique, where Zimbabwe now has 6,000 troops to support President Joaquim Chissano's Frelimo government, and in the southern provinces of Midlands and Matabeleland, where anti-government "dissidents" have carried out a series of grisly murders in recent months.

"It is against the background of a region embroiled in South Africa-sponsored destabilisation, aggression and turmoil that we decided to form 6 Brigade," Prime Minister Robert Mugabe told the passing out ceremony.

War clouds are looming on Zimbabwe's horizon, and nowhere more so than along the majestic eastern highlands that separate southern Africa's richest nation from its poorest, Mozambique. It was over those mountains that black nationalist guerrillas crossed to win a nasty, independence war from white-ruled Rhodesia seven years ago. This time the gunmen breaching the border are rebels of the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo). As they did during the independence war, tea plantation managers and commercial farmers on the border today are hiring guards with shotguns and installing farm-to-farm radios. The Zimbabwean army has deployed troops on the region's giant tea estates.

Renamo rebels raided Zimbabwe at

least five times last month, including a clash on 25 August with security forces at the Jersey Tea Estate, about 300 miles south east of the capital, Harare, that left four Zimbabwean troops dead. The battle was an important marker in Zimbabwe's involvement in Mozambique's 12-year-old war. It was the first time that the rebels had killed Zimbabwean security forces on their own soil. And it pointed up the Mugabe government's near impossible task of defending a stretch of border over 600 miles long with its army of 47,000.

Renamo first threatened Zimbabwe last October, when the rebels vowed to make Harare pay for its decision to station between 6,000 and 10,000 troops in Mozambique to bolster the Frelimo army. But until last month's attack at the Jersey Tea Estate, rebel actions in Zimbabwe were looting and kidnapping raids on isolated border villages.

The rise in Renamo attacks has paralleled a flood into Zimbabwe of 80,000 Mozambicans seeking refuge from famine and war back home. And top Zimbabwean officials are suggesting that Renamo enjoys the support of some refugees and Mozambican migrant workers in the border province of Manicaland. Many of the refugees are Ndau, a strongly independent people whose homeland stretches from Manicaland across Mozambique to the Indian Ocean port of Beira. Neither Mozambique nor Zimbabwe has had much luck in dampening their autonomous spirit. Renamo's self-styled President, Afonso Dhaklamba, is also Ndau.

Ironically, the growing confrontation between the Zimbabwean army and Renamo is in a sense a spin-off of the independence struggle. The Rhodesians, recruiting heavily among the Ndau, set up Renamo in the early 1970s to spy on the Zimbabwean

nationalists then based in Mozambique. "I don't think it would be fair to say it was too much of a monster in those days, but there was always this danger that it would run away with itself," the creator of Renamo, the late ex-Rhodesian intelligence chief, Ken Flower, said in a recent interview.

The rebel war began spinning out of control in 1980 when, on the eve of Zimbabwe's independence, the Rhodesians handed Renamo over to South Africa. Since then, it has grown from about 500 troops to nearly 20,000 and brought Mozambique to the brink of collapse. The rebels gained strength throughout the early 1980s, taking advantage of heavy South African backing and public disenchantment with the government's centralised economic policies which favoured inefficient state farms over peasants. In some areas, forced villagisation by Frelimo greatly aided the rebels' recruitment drives.

Renamo eroded the government's control over wide tracts of land and sabotaged Mozambique's strategic transport routes, which Zimbabwe and its neighbours need to reduce dependence on South Africa. Though some Zimbabwean troops have been in Mozambique since 1982, Harare upped the ante in July 1985 by dispatching 10,000 soldiers to guard the Beira corridor — a railway, road and oil pipeline system that carries vital imports and exports.

Since then, the Zimbabwean army, considered by many Western experts to be one of Africa's best, has proved a potent strike force against rebel bases in the central provinces of Manica, Sofala and Tete. But it has failed to turn the tide of the war decisively. Today the Mozambican conflict is a savage routine of push and shove, neither side having enough muscle to deliver a

knockout blow to the other. Most analysts consider the war a hopeless stalemate.

To explain its army's widening role in Mozambique, the Zimbabwe government has launched a publicity drive at home. But while the Mugabe government supports Mozambique's policy of no negotiations with Renamo, there is growing disillusionment among the Zimbabwean officer corps with the Frelimo army. "The only real solution for Frelimo is to rebuild the entire army, bottom to top," said one Zimbabwean army major. "Right now the army is not effective. In some areas it is just written off."

Yet Zimbabwe is likely to increase its military commitment to Mozambique. Mr Mugabe has pledged to send troops to defend the Limpopo railway line, being rebuilt with British funds through southern Mozambique to Maputo, the port tailored to meet Zimbabwe's non-oil foreign trade needs.

The war in Mozambique already costs Zimbabwe about £300,000 a day, according to banking sources in Harare. It is a major drain on the economy and is a prime reason that military spending this year will gobble up £270m of the £1.8bn national budget.

The rising costs have prompted some analysts to question the wisdom of the government's decision to allow the army to leave its bases along the Beira Corridor and play such an aggressive role in the war. "If we had wanted to stay out of this trouble, Zimbabwe should have made clear it was just defending the Beira Corridor, which we need," said one former Zimbabwean military officer. "But now we are more deeply involved in Mozambique's war, and it was inevitable that Renamo would strike Zimbabwe."

Yet Mr Mugabe feels Zimbabwe has no choice but to take the battle to Renamo inside Mozambique. Because of its wealth, Zimbabwe, he believes, is the ultimate target of the South African-backed rebels. It was a point he made in a speech on 11 August to mark the celebrations of Heroes' Day in Harare. "We have decided it is wiser to fight the war now rather than later on, when the situation has grown worse and much more unfavourable for us."