

Mozambique rebels widen attacks, threaten peace in Southern Africa

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HARARE

CRM
13/10/87

South Africa.

Although the recent raids into Zimbabwe have not so far been aimed at foreigners, there is increasing concern about the safety of international aid workers in the hardest-hit areas.

About 10 Canadian teachers are working in the region of Zimbabwe most affected by the attacks. Irene Mathias, director in Zimbabwe of the World University Service of Canada, said yesterday that she plans to travel to the area next week to determine whether it will be necessary to begin pulling people out.

"They know stuff is going on and they do feel a little bit nervous," she said. "We do have contingency plans."

The recent wave of raids began on June 15 when a Renamo force swept into the Rushinga district of northeastern Zimbabwe, burning houses, looting stores and abducting 70 Zimbabwean peasants.

That attack was quickly followed

by several others, launched mainly from Tete province in northern Mozambique. In one raid, the rebels left behind a supply of crudely produced leaflets declaring that the attacks were in retaliation for the presence of Zimbabwean troops in Mozambique.

Later, the raids moved farther south and have recently been concentrated in the region around Chimanimani and Chipinge in eastern Zimbabwe.

"It's a complex and rather indefinite situation," one Western diplomat said.

He added, however, that there is at least a circumstantial case to be made that the wave of cross-border incidents is part of a deliberate plan to weaken Zimbabwe's willingness to provide military support for the Mozambican Government.

"It's sewing the potential for discord between Zimbabwe and Mozambique, between ordinary people," he said.

The perilous security of southern Africa has come under attack on a new front lately, as anti-Government rebels in Mozambique have begun striking economic and civilian targets inside neighboring Zimbabwe, diplomatic sources say.

The sources speculated that the recent wave of bloody cross-border attacks may be aimed at driving wedges between the front-line states that border South Africa and are opposed to that country's system of white-minority rule.

The sources said there are already signs of growing tension between Zimbabwe and Mozambique as a result of the troubled situation along their 800-kilometre border.

The spread of the conflict poses an additional challenge for Commonwealth leaders in Vancouver seeking to hasten the end of apartheid in South Africa and to help other countries in the region withstand a range of political, economic and military threats thought to be engineered by Pretoria.

Since mid-June, more than 250 Zimbabwean civilians, mainly peasants, have been either slain or abducted in a string of 51 incursions attributed to the Mozambican National Resistance, known as Renamo.

Ninety people are known to have died in the attacks, but it is likely that a complete list of the fatalities would be considerably longer.

"It's a legitimate inference that there have been more than 90," a senior diplomat in Harare said. "That's the confirmed figure."

The number of Zimbabweans abducted by the rebels since June is set at 165. It is likely that many of those are now dead.

The recent spread of the fighting into Zimbabwe is thought to be in retaliation for the presence of thousands of Zimbabwean troops in Mozambique, where they are helping to defend vital rail and port facilities from guerrilla sabotage.

Despite South African denials, the Mozambican rebels are widely believed to be receiving covert support from Pretoria in a campaign of terrorism and economic sabotage that has all but devastated Mozambique in recent years.

Although there is no solid evidence of a South African role in Renamo's recent incursions into Zimbabwe, one diplomat in Harare speculated that the Mozambican rebels would be unlikely to launch such a campaign on their own initiative.

"I don't think Renamo is all that well organized that they can orchestrate a campaign of this kind without being encouraged," he said.

Earlier this month, South African Defence Minister Magnus Malan acknowledged the presence of his country's combat troops in another front-line state, Angola, where they are supporting a force of anti-Government rebels.

In addition, there have been other signs or charges recently of escalating military activity in the region by