

Sena: Ashes and Bandits

by Paul Fauvet

The people of Sena, a small central Mozambican town on the south bank of the Zambezi, are rebuilding their homes.

New thatched huts are rising next to the ashes of ones that were burnt down the last time bandits of the South African backed MNR raided Sena. That was on 6 December. The local administrator, Antonio Enoque, recalls that "the enemy attacked, at the precise moment the people were preparing to plant their fields".

That opportunity had been lost, and now the 2,400 people living in and around Sena do not dare venture out any distance to try and restart agricultural production. The rain that fell in December was thus rendered largely useless from the farmers' point of view.

Sena, and the town of Mutarara, on the opposite bank of the Zambezi, were under MNR occupation from September 1986 until March 1987. This was part of a major bandit offensive into central Mozambique launched from Malawian soil.

The Mozambican armed forces, together with their Zimbabwean allies, retook the two towns in March, but found that immense damage had been done. In particular, the magnificent 4.8 kilometre long rail bridge spanning the Zambezi between Sena and Mutarara had been expertly sabotaged. Two spans, one on each bank of the river were blown off their supports. No trains will pass along this bridge, which forms part of the line from Malawi to Beira, for a long time to come.

Once Sena was back under Mozambican control, people trickled out of the bush where they had taken refuge. There were eight months of precarious security, and then the MNR returned in force on 6 December. Many of the inhabitants of Sena fled, either to the relative safety of islands in the Zambezi, or across the shattered bridge to Mutarara. Despite the sabotage, the bridge is still negotiable on foot, though extremely hazardous.

Eleven people died in the attack. Luis Gimo, a peasant who does not know his age, but looks about 50, said that seven, including one of his children, died in a single house when the bandits threw in two

hand grenades.

Those, like Mr Gimo, who did not manage to escape were used as beasts of burden to carry the MNR's loot to a bandit camp further south. Mr Gimo said that he was forced to carry a 50 kilo sack of rice on his back. The weight dug into his flesh, and he peeled off his ragged shirt to show us the scar that had been left.

The rice is part of the food aid that is regularly airlifted to Sena. Mr Gimo says the bandits joked "you're tired with eating rice, so now you can carry it for us".

With his wife and five children, Mr Gimo was forced to walk for four days through the bush. When he tried to put his heavy load down, and drink the water from the recent rains that had collected in hollows along the path, his captors beat him, and forced him to continue the march.

According to Mr Gimo, the MNR said to their captives: "We've told you before to leave the town and live with us, but since you didn't obey we have to come and take you".

They threatened Mr Gimo and his family, saying that if they ran away, then the next time the MNR raided Sena, they would kill them. This, however, did not prevent Mr Gimo from slipping away under cover of night at the first opportunity. This came when they reached the bandit camp, and he was relieved of his precious cargo of rice. Once the bandits had taken this food into the base, they were less interested in guarding their captives closely.

When Mr Gimo returned to Sena, the bandits were no longer occupying the town. Outnumbered on 6 December, the Mozambican troops had retreated across the river. From the Mutarara side, they organised a counter-attack, and three days later expelled the MNR from Sena.

The December attack increased the sense of desolation in Sena. Already, as a result of the MNR's occupation of late 1986, there was not a single undamaged building in the town centre. Gaping holes yawn in roofs and walls. Fallen masonry and other debris are scattered across the floors of what were once shops. Rusting railway wagons lie on their sides, a few hundred metres from the sabotaged bridge. Now to add to all this, there were the pathetic piles of ashes from the huts that the raiders had burnt down.

Once the MNR had left, people drifted back into the town, and Mr

Enoque gives its current population as 2,395. The new huts they have built are much smaller than a normal Mozambican dwelling. Apparently the people of Sena are not prepared to put a large amount of energy into building substantial houses, in case the MNR reappears and burns them down again.

Among those killed on 6 December was Sena's only nurse. But the town's health post continues its work, at least at a minimal level. A health auxiliary worker distributes some of the medicines flown in by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 22 December - one of the last flights before the ICRC grounded its planes in response to threats that the MNR sent to their Geneva offices. Anyone who is seriously ill must be ferried across the river to Mutarara, where the health centre is more functional.

Relief flights into Sena now take the form of an airlift managed by the Disasters Control Office, and financed by the Italian government. It is Italian donations of rice and cooking oil that are on the flights. The DC-3 used for these flights can carry a maximum cargo of about three tonnes.

People look for sources of protein in the nearby bush to augment their diet. What they find there turned the stomachs of the American journalists accompanying us to Sena. Indeed, the wriggling mass of large green caterpillars that one family had caught may not look as appetising as fillet steak, but it is a perfectly adequate source of protein. The caterpillars, mashed into a stew together with some local leaves, were going to be poured over the donated rice.

Life in Sena is precarious, but there is not much evident malnutrition. The people here have patiently learnt the arts of survival.

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