

WORLD

Renamo rebels choke off capital of Mozambique

By Peter Youngusband
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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — Rebels opposing the Marxist government of Mozambique have placed a stranglehold around the capital of Maputo, intelligence sources here report.

The siege by the rebels, members of the Mozambican National Resistance — RENAMO as it is known by its Portuguese acronym — has left the city in desperate straits. But, with the rebels apparently unable to deliver a knockout blow, it is considered unlikely the government's East and West bloc supporters will simply let Maputo starve.

RENAMO lacks the heavy weapons necessary to tackle large concentrations of government troops head-on. So the best the rebels can hope to gain from their siege is to force the government, run by the

Marxist Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, or FRELIMO, to the negotiating table.

For almost a year, people trying to enter or leave the city on the only main road to the north have had to run a gauntlet of ambushes that have claimed hundreds of lives.

In the past three months, the remaining road and rail links to South Africa and Swaziland have also come under increasingly intensive attack, tightening the siege around a city swollen with thousands of refugees fleeing the merciless bush war.

Shortages of food and other necessities have become serious. Failure of electricity and water systems as a result of rebel sabotage on the city's perimeters are frequent.

Maputo is squeezed into the toe of a peninsula-like strip of land, bounded on one side by South Africa and Swaziland and on the other by

the sea.

In an apparent attempt to force homeless peasants into an already overcrowded capital, RENAMO is destroying villages in the hinterland for hundreds of miles around Maputo. The Marxist FRELIMO government must feed and shelter them. Otherwise, it will face urban riots in addition to a rural war.

The strategy of isolating Maputo seems to have been hatched last year after RENAMO was forced from its sanctuaries in Malawi. Since then, the emphasis of the war has shifted to the southern countryside around the capital.

By mid-year, it was reported, heavily armed RENAMO gangs of up to 500 men were overrunning and destroying scores of villages in the central and southern provinces of Inhambane and Maputo.

On July 18 came the massacre of more than 400 people at the town of

Homoine, followed almost a month later by the killing of almost 100 people farther south at Manjacaze.

As the gangs moved south, they began to attack guarded convoys on the main road north from Maputo. In the past three months, more than 400 people have died in these ambushes, some of which have taken place within 35 miles of the capital.

The route is traveled only in guarded convoys, subject to constant attack. The rebels' attention is now focused on road and rail links to the west, which are crucial for the importation of vital goods and materials as well as being a major foreign currency earner as the conduit for South African exports via Maputo.

In late 1987, the rail link with South Africa was cut four times. The latest incident occurred on New Year's Eve when a train was derailed by a mine blast in which 22 people lost their lives.

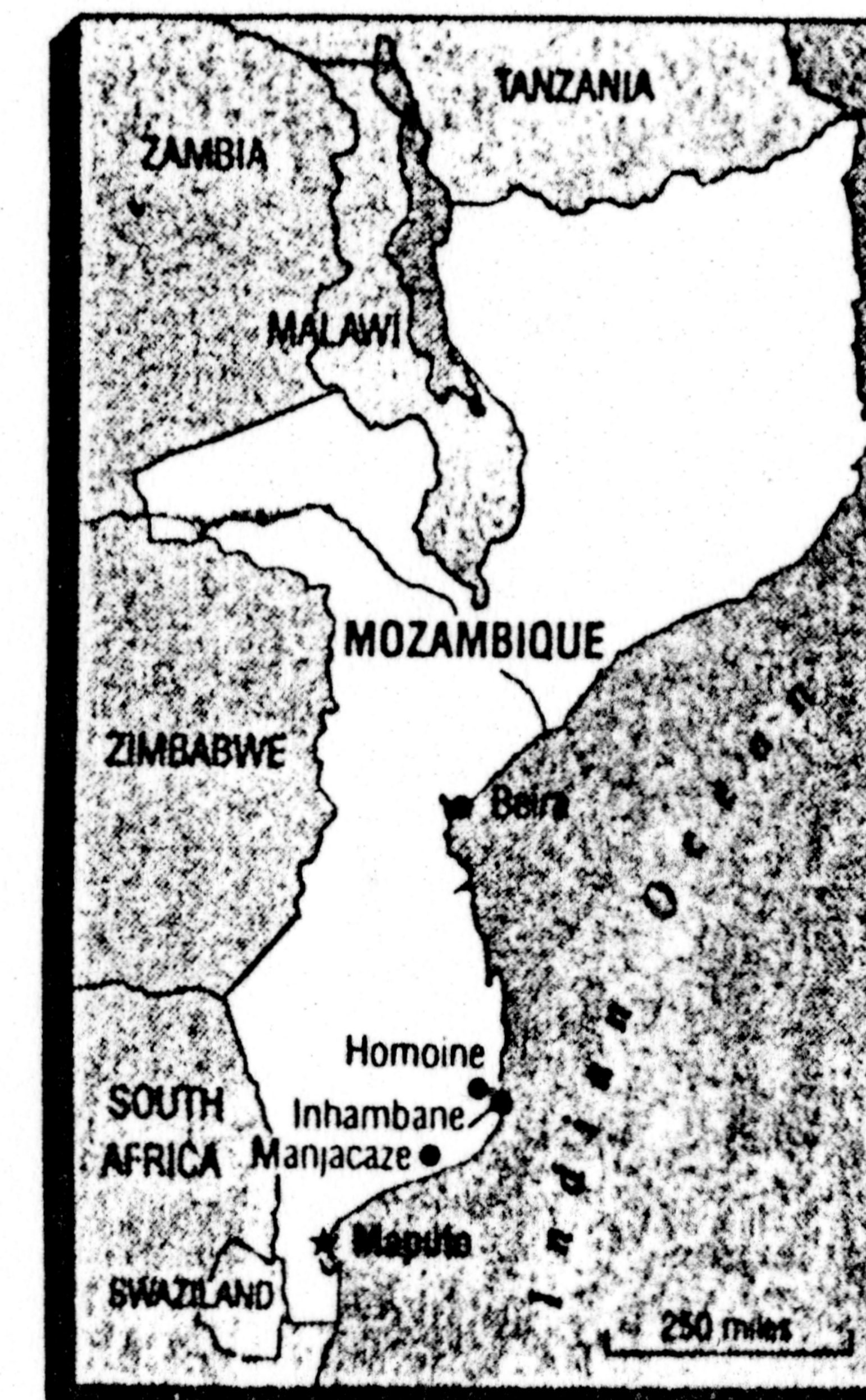
Innumerable vehicles have been ambushed on the roads entering Mozambique from South Africa and Swaziland.

RENAMO, it is believed, has massed up to 5,000 men in the southern Inhambane and Maputo provinces to carry out its siege strategy. Some major bases reportedly are within sight of the capital.

The government, however, is receiving aid from both West and East bloc countries.

Government troops have launched a major operation to try to break the stranglehold on Maputo, but they are reluctant — in fact, unable — to pursue guerrillas away from the roads and railway lines and into the bush.

Only one thing is certain. The strategy of generating refugees and besieging Maputo will succeed in adding to the suffering of an already war-weary Mozambican populace.



Map by Paul Woodward / The Washington Times