

On the backs of the people

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HARARE

A SHADOWY FORCE of anti-government rebels — believed to enjoy South African backing and known as RENAMO (the Portuguese acronym for Mozambican National Resistance) — has been waging a bitter military campaign in the former Portuguese colony of Mozambique since the late 1970s.

That campaign has long been thought to be aimed primarily at the civilian population rather than at directly confronting the leftist Government of FRELIMO (for Mozambican Liberation Front), which has ruled the country since independence in 1975.

In recent years, Western countries such as Britain and the United States have become increasingly well disposed toward Mozambique, previously considered a Soviet client state. However, right-wing opinion-makers in the United States — including such Republicans as Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Senate minority leader Robert Dole of Kansas — continue to press the White House to switch its allegiance to RENAMO.

Last December, in response to a 300 per cent increase during 1987 in the number of Mozambican refugees in the region — they now number nearly one million, plus at least 1.5 million displaced people inside the country — the U.S. State Department engaged Robert Gersony, an independent consultant, to investigate the reasons behind the mounting refugee crisis in southern Africa.

Mr. Gersony spent three months visiting 42 refugee locations in five countries. The following excerpts are taken from his 43-page report, which was released in Washington last month and concludes that RENAMO has murdered at least 100,000 civilians in the past two years:

REFUGEE REPORTS suggest three typical types of RENAMO operations . . . The three types of areas refugees described are tax areas, control areas and destruction areas.

1. Tax areas: (These) tend to be rural areas in which the population resides in extremely dispersed patterns . . . RENAMO combatants move freely through such areas and routinely (weekly or monthly) visit the farmers. They demand a contribution of . . . food, chickens and goats, perhaps some clothes, a radio or other possessions. They demand at will a young girl or married woman for sex. To the degree that it is necessary to transport the resources which are extracted, the local people are obliged to serve as porters (RENAMO appears to have virtually no mechanized transport anywhere in Mozambique) . . . But the burdens placed on them are more moderate than those placed on the population of other areas . . .

If Mozambique's RENAMO guerrillas truly want to build popular support, they're going about it the wrong way

2. Control areas: (These) tend to be nominally divided into three sub-categories: combatant bases, field areas and dependent areas.

Combatant bases . . . are served by a staff of exclusively male captives who provide food, water, cleaning and other support services. Women are provided on demand from other sectors of the control areas . . .

(Field areas) are permanent agricultural lands . . . The workers on these farms are captives who toil at a regular schedule, usually long hours during a six-day week . . . In addition to its production tasks, this . . . group is also used as porters . . . The refugees report that these trips usually begin at dawn and continue until evening — perhaps 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. More recent arrivals report that, increasingly, the porters are not permitted food on these trips, and are allowed to drink water only when they pass streams . . . The loads are heavy, the pace quick . . . Those who have served as porters reported uniformly that discipline on these forced marches is extremely harsh. Those who cannot keep up, who rest without authorization, drop their burdens or refuse to continue, are routinely beaten very severely, sometimes until they are dead . . .

Another function of the young girls and adult women is to provide sex to the combatants. From refugee reports it appears that these women are required to submit to sexual demands, in effect to be raped, on a frequent, sustained basis . . . According to those who have served as porters, women are frequently raped along the transport routes. Women are also dispatched from the field areas to combatant bases on demand . . . Severe beating is inflicted on young girls and women who resist sexual demands . . .

The third type of sub-category within the control areas is dependent areas, populated by the elderly, who cannot serve in other more taxing functions, and young children . . .

Given the unusually high rate of resource and energy extraction from the captives in the control areas, it is curious that more have not fled . . . The explanation, according to the refugees who have resided in these areas and later escaped, lies in an effective security and surveillance system.

The heart of the system are the RENAMO police, called majuba or mujiba . . . In general, the refugees indicate that these police tend

to be armed with cutting instruments (machetes, knives, bayonets, axes) rather than with firearms . . .

Attempted escape from a control area is often treated as a capital crime . . . When individuals make successful escapes, wives and children left behind may be executed in retribution . . .

One refugee reported that during a portering job he was led to a small clearing and shown the decomposed bodies of many men, women and children. He was told

by RENAMO combatants that this was a place where those apprehended while attempting to escape were taken and executed . . .

It appears from the refugees' reports that not until death becomes a real possibility in their minds do captives consider risking the dangerous escape attempt . . . Almost invariably, the escapees travel only by night, surviving on wild fruits and leaves, walking through the bush, never on the roads . . .

3. Destruction areas: Entire geographical areas may be subject to the destruction-zone designation . . . The destruction program may proceed through three nominal stages. First, some villages which are the targets of a destruction effort appear to become the subject of careful, advance intelligence collection . . . Second, depending on the area, a "political" visit by RENAMO combatants may follow . . . During this stage, RENAMO combatants may proceed directly to the homes of government officials . . . Refugees report that such persons are usually executed . . . The third stage . . . is the actual military attack . . .

The attack stage was sometimes reported to begin with what appeared to the inhabitants to be the indiscriminate firing of automatic weapons by a substantial force of attacking RENAMO combatants . . .

Eye-witness accounts indicate that, when civilians are killed in these indiscriminate attacks, whether against defended or undefended villages, children, often together with mothers and elderly people, are also killed . . .

Deaths were also reported in instances when RENAMO combatants, in the absence of resistance or defence, were reported to chase the villagers toward natural barriers, such as rivers, or otherwise use the physical surroundings to cause their deaths by drowning or asphyxiation . . .

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: First . . . if the refugee reports are generally accurate and the sample reasonably representative, it is conservatively estimated that 100,000 civilians may have been murdered by RENAMO in this manner . . . The violence is systematic and coordinated, and not a series of spontaneous, isolated incidents by undisciplined combatants . . .

Second, the relationship between RENAMO and the civilian population, according to refugee accounts, revolves almost exclusively around a harsh extraction of labor and food . . . There are virtually no reports of attempts to win the loyalty — or even the neutrality — of villagers . . .

Third . . . in both the murder and non-murder categories, only 3 to 4 per cent of the complaints were attributed to FRELIMO soldiers. They tended to be isolated reports, often from areas of the country most remote from Maputo . . .