

Death and destruction in Milange

by Gil Lauriciano

South Africa's MNR bandits murdered hundreds of people during the 20 months in which they occupied the district of Milange, in the central province of Zambezia, on the border with Malawi.

The bandits occupied Milange town on 29 September 1986, and were driven out on 2 June this year. In the Mozambican army operation that retook Milange, 70 bandits were killed. Eye-witnesses told AIM that most of the bandits fled over the border into Malawi when the Mozambican air force began its attacks.

The top MNR leader in Zambezia, Calisto Meque, fled from the MNR's "regional base" at Mulumbo, near the town, shortly before the attack. It is believed that he too crossed into Malawi.

While they controlled the district, the MNR put back into positions of authority three regulos. Regulos are chiefs whom the Portuguese colonial administration used as rural tax collectors. They were stripped of their powers after Mozambican independence in 1975.

Of the regulos restored by the MNR in Milange, only one, a man named Manganira, stayed after the army retook the district. Manganira told AIM that "the bandits killed many people here. It was enough to suspect that someone wanted to run away, or had no food to give them for the bandits to order him killed".

Manganira said that most of the killings took place in areas which the MNR handed to the other two regulos, Sombwa and Tamanda, both of whom fled with the bandits.

Families who lived in Milange were obliged to give a 50 kilo sack of maize every month to the bandits. The MNR then took this food into Malawi and used it "to buy drinks", according to Manganira.

This former regulo is now helping the authorities to reorganise the people who have been freed from MNR control. At a meeting chaired by Zambezia provincial governor Carlos Agostinho do Rosario, a week after the retaking of Milange, the local people declared that Manganira had not committed any crimes.

Technicians from various Mozambican companies and institutions are making preliminary studies for the reconstruction of Milange. The MNR left the district in ruins, and the technicians believe that very little can be repaired in the short or medium term.

The state electricity company is the only one which guarantees that, given "normal conditions", matters can be put right quickly. Electric power can be restored to the district within 45 days. Milange was supplied with power from Malawi, and the bandits sabotaged the power lines on the Mozambican side of the border.

Milange town is a desolate sight. It has been reduced virtually to rubble. Two types of destruction are visible. One is that caused by explosives, while the second results from systematic looting. The bandits sacked the town in a comprehensive and meticulous way.

The roofing has been removed from the houses that line the town's only tarmac street, and they have all been structurally damaged. Some of the walls have been blown up, but the doors and windowframes have all been ripped out, to be taken over the border and sold in Malawi. Lamposts and telephone posts have also been ripped open in order to make use of the cables inside.

Piping has all been carefully removed from the interior of the ruined houses, as has all zinc sheeting.

On the outskirts of the town, an area where the workers from the Milange tea-processing plants used to live has been laid waste. Here the houses, made from local materials, were all set alight.

Milange used to have three tea-processing factories, which produced 13,000 tonnes of tea annually. Of these, only one can be restored to working order in the medium term, according to Balbev Singh, an Indian specialist working for the Mozambican state tea company, Emocha.

There are just two buildings in the town that the MNR did not damage. One is a Roman Catholic church, and the other is a house where the priests lived. They celebrated mass every week in the ruined town.

"We don't know where these priests came from", one person who had returned from Milange after taking refuge in Malawi told AIM. This was one of the few local residents prepared to speak to journalists. Most of the 1,500 people currently in Milange town

are still very afraid that the bandits may return and reoccupy the district.

Despite the repeated declarations by the Malawian government that it is opposed to the destabilisation of Mozambique, the local authorities in Milange say that the MNR continues to use Malawian territory both as a refuge and as a launching pad for attacks into Mozambique.

The bandit force, estimated at about 2,000, that attacked Milange in 1986 entered from Malawi. District administrator Captain Rufino Kantumbianga and a 500-strong Mozambican para-military force resisted as best they could, but eventually had to retreat into Malawi. Here they were detained for 48 hours before being repatriated to the Mozambican province of Tete, which lies on the other side of Malawi.

"At that time, Malawian support for the bandits was plainly on view", White Levison, another refugee who has returned from Malawi, told AIM. "In prison they maltreated us. Several members of the Malawian security forces said that Renamo (the Portuguese acronym for the MNR) was going to teach us a lesson".

At Milange, the frontier remained in operation even during the bandit occupation. But while the MNR was in control, Mozambican refugees in Malawi were forbidden from crossing the border and re-entering Milange. Likewise, the people on the Mozambican side who had fallen into MNR hands were not allowed to travel into Malawi.

The same did not apply to Malawians. "The Malawians were always coming to Milange looking for firewood, iron and zinc sheeting", another former refugee told AIM.

Other refugees, who also asked that their names be withheld, said that during the MNR occupation white people coming from Malawi frequently visited Milange.

Now the situation has been reversed. Now it is only the Mozambican refugees who are authorised to come to Milange to gather firewood, or grass for the roofing of their huts, or to visit relatives who have been freed from MNR control.

Representatives of Mozambican companies told AIM that they now have "important information" provided by their former workers who are now refugees in Malawi, on the current whereabouts of some of

their stolen property, including livestock, machinery and furniture that is now in Malawi.

Everyone in Milange discusses the question of property stolen from the town and taken into Malawi. According to ex-regulo Manganira, "those people inside Malawi who have our property ought to be aware that they only got hold of it because of the MNR's slaughter of their brothers. Now that the situation is better they should return those goods".

After the recapture of Milange, the Mozambicans expressed an interest in contacting the Malawians to discuss the stolen property and other matters.

According to a local official, one meeting took place on the bridge over the river separating the two countries. Each delegation remained standing, each on their own territory, during the meeting.

The Malawian authorities have been supporting hundreds of thousands of Mozambican refugees in their country, with all the cost and effort that that implies. Malawian soldiers have died in defending the Nacala railway line from the MNR, and the Malawian state has been forced to spend astronomical sums on rerouting its trade through South Africa, since the bandits have cut Malawi's natural outlets to the Mozambican coast.

Given all this, it is a tragic paradox that the bandits are still able to use Malawian territory on a large scale. It is the hope of the local people and of the Milange authorities that the two governments will gradually succeed in altering the conditions that make this use of Malawian soil possible.

Capt. Kantumbianga insists that Mozambique "will continue to observe internationally established norms" in its relationship with Malawi.

"We are always going to contact our Malawian neighbours to resolve any problems that may affect our collaboration", he says.