

Errant youths posing as Renamo bandits

By Farai P Makotsi

AT the Regina Coeli Mission hospital and school, the talk last weekend was about the authenticity of a letter allegedly written by MNR bandits demanding cooperation from villagers in the area or risk meeting an unspecified wrath.

The mission hospital, about 58 km northeast of Nyanga, is situated about 20 km from the Mozambique-Zimbabwe boarder.

The purportedly MNR letter, which a reporter was allowed to read but could not make copies of, says local residents who refuse to cooperate with the bandits in supplying food and groceries — including alcoholic beverages — would be dealt with ruthlessly.

The letter, written in long hand and in Shona, contained a number of grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Speaking often in vociferous tones, several villagers debated whether or not the letter, which was circulated in the area a week ago, was nothing more than the work of a few misguided youth.

Following an increase in MNR banditry activities in the area some unemployed youth in the area are alleged to have taken advantage of a heightened sense of fear among local residents to commit extortions and robberies against local bus-

inesses and villages under the guise of being MNR bandits.

"Look at what happened at Nyakomba," said one participant in the debate. "A letter like this was circulated and look at what happened afterwards".

At Nyakomba, a township situated about 3 km from the border and east of the mission hospital, a group of eight unemployed school leavers were discovered to have written some threatening letters to local businesses and had claimed to be MNR bandits.

After the letters were circulated, the youth are said to have gone on a rampage demanding money from businesses and villagers. Those who refused to cooperate with the youth gang were subjected to bodily harm

or found their homes and businesses broken into.

"With this particular letter, we have some information that it is not genuine and that within a day or two we may be able to find who wrote it, our headman already knows about our suspicions and I am sure he will support 'a full investigation,'" said another woman.

LETTERS

Letters or not, the feeling of uneasiness and fear continues to affect much of the population in the area. The residents say although the presence of the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) was some comfort, they nonetheless still feared for their well being particularly at night — when the MNR seem to

prefer conducting its act against civilians.

Asked for comment, one ZNA soldier, who said he had been patrolling the mission hospital area for the past six months, confirmed that indeed some youth in the area had written fake threatening letters claiming to be MNR bandits.

But, he added: "We never dismiss these letters on the face of it. We try to follow them up and anticipate what the bandits may do next because not all letters are fake.

"We have had instances when in fact they have been followed up with brutal force being used on civilians. For now, it's unfortunate that some of our citizens are playing with other people's lives just like that."