

# Fears over future of Malawi route

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## Escort convoy ends as Zimbabwean troops are re-deployed

UNLESS the Mozambican government and the rebel MNR movement sign a total ceasefire agreement soon, the future and viability of the highway from Zimbabwe to Malawi via the provincial capital of Tete looks uncertain, according to military officials in Beira.

"The route was very dangerous until Zimbabweans moved into to provide an escort for the convoys that move daily from Nyamapanda to Lilongwe. We have to move very quickly and stop the war to ensure its viability," said Major Bonifaso Macamo, the provincial commander of the Armed Forces of Mozambique (FAM).

Security along the routes had become "precarious" following the withdrawal last week of Zimbabwean forces who provided security for heavy trucks ferrying cargo, mainly from South Africa, to Lilongwe over the past eight years.

The highway, unlike the Beira and Limpopo corridors, is not covered by the "partial ceasefire" agreement between the Frelimo government of President Joachim Chissano and the rebel MNR movement signed in Rome on December 1, 1990.

In terms of the agreement, Zimbabweans began moving out of the area on December 21 barely a few hours after a convoy of goods trucks, escorted by a company of the mechanised battalion of Zimbabwe, was attacked as it approached Mameme on the Malawi border.

The Mozambicans are not providing any escorts; they only patrol the highway. Although there were no injuries during the Mameme skirmish, mounted by the MNR, truck drivers interviewed soon afterwards said they were worried about this development because there had not been any

attacks since July.

The FAM have vowed to repulse any rebel attacks on the highway, and have since taken up positions to protect the vehicles destined for Malawi.

"We will fight hard to keep the route open until a full ceasefire agreement is signed," said Major Macamo.

### From our Beira Correspondent

"We know that the withdrawal of Zimbabweans from some positions in Mozambique will put a major strain on our resources, on our army in particular. We will have to make sure that we cover those areas in addition to the ones we have been covering."

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe has redeployed all its 1 000 troops from combat positions inside central Mozambique to join the 3 000 others who were stationed within the Beira Corridor. Some units of the mechanised battalion moved from Tete to the main oil terminal in Beira while others were withdrawn back to their barracks in Zimbabwe.

The Rome agreement stipulates that Zimbabweans should be confined to within three kilometres of either side of the two corridors. The MNR has agreed not to attack the railroad, the oil pipeline or the powerlines which Zimbabweans are protecting. They are also not allowed to cross the two corridors into other areas, lest they violate the terms of the Rome protocol.

In an interview, Major Pedro Limo, provincial commander of Zambezia said all the bases previously held by Zimbabwe-

ans had been filled by the FAM units. These include Cassa Banana, Vandusi, Machesse, Villa Paiva de Andriade and Tete.

"Our main fear is that the MNR will fight hard to retake Cassa Banana. They feel that the place is their headquarters and according to Mozambican beliefs, any leader who occupies the Gorongosa base will rule Mozambique," said Limo.

Zimbabwean soldiers will always remember Cassa Banana: they routed the MNR at that base on four different occasions. And on each of those occasions, they surrendered to the FAM, who were too weak to defend it.

The Zimbabwe National Army finally left the base to the first battalion of the FAM's Ninth Brigade last week. This brigade, trained by Zimbabweans, is led by a Frelimo war veteran Correia Saene Sopa.

Mr Sopa said he was confident that the battalion would defend the base provided it was supported by the airforce and the FAM headquarters at Beira.

"We will fail to defend this place if we do not get the necessary logistical support, for example we do not have any radio communications and this is already posing some serious problems," he said.

"An efficient airforce is necessary if we are to gain an upperhand during these final stages of the war here in Mozambique," said Lt Bernard Ndebu, who mounted the artillery at Gorongosa just



Zimbabwean soldiers pictured as they prepare for re-deployment. Picture: Ziana.

before Zimbabweans left the area.

There are 50 000 civilians around Gorongosa area who have since began a long march southwards to the Beira Corridor. Some of the villagers left Cassa Banana to join MNR camps nearby.

"They fear that the FAM may not be sufficiently equipped to deal with the MNR. Some are running to areas where Zimbabweans are based while others are even joining the enemy," said Mr Floriano Msipu, the refugee camp administrator at Gorongosa.

Mr Msipu said as Zimbabweans were moving out of Cassa Banana, the MNR abducted 15 civilians from the camp. FAM did not act, thus eroding the morale and confidence of the povo.

Generally, the 15-year-old civil war may be coming to an end. But, there are likely to be more casualties, particularly among civilians as both Frelimo and the MNR vie for more ground to bolster their respective negotiating positions.

"There is nothing we can

do," said a helpless Mr Migui Tair Tomo, whose wife was among the 15 civilians abducted from Cassa Banana last week.

When a war takes such a long time, the cry: "aluta continua!" appears to loose steam by the day.