

Mozambicans flee heavy fighting in Gorongosa

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MOZAMBICAN civilians are fleeing the Gorongosa area en masse for the Beira Corridor to escape the heavy fighting reported to be going on there between MNR bandits and Mozambican Armed Forces, the FAM.

Throughout most of the banditry, Mozambicans have been steadily trickling in the corridor. However, an extraordinarily large number of people has been massing along the Beira Corridor in the past few weeks following the redeployment of Zimbabwe troops from forward bases in the Gorongosa area to the corridor.

There had been fears that the MNR bandits would launch a major offensive in the Gorongosa area of Mozambique after the redeployment. Zimbabwean and Mozambican military sources, who confirmed that there is heavy fighting in the area, said the offensive was the bandits' attempt to regain lost territory.

Zimbabwe completed the redeployment of its troops on December 28 in compliance with a partial ceasefire agreement signed between the MNR bandits and Maputo in Rome, Italy, on December 1. The former Zimbabwe National Army positions in Gorongosa were handed over to Mozambican troops.

The civilians massing along the Beira Corridor were seeking protection as MNR bandits escalated war in the coveted Gorongosa area. The ZNA Special Task Force commander on the Beira Corridor, Colonel Clever Chiramba, last week said a large concentration of civilians on the corridor was expected because of heavy fighting, particularly around Villa Paiva de Andrade and Casa Banana.

Civilians were also escaping possible famine because relief agencies were no longer reaching them because of the fighting.

The fighting at Casa Banana was reportedly so heavy it was unclear whether the former MNR bandit headquarters was still in the hands of the government troops.

The bandits have already violated the partial ceasefire under which they were supposed to stop attacks on the transport corridors. Last week, they penetrated the 3 km zone within which ZNA is confined under the agreement and sabotaged the railway line.

Concentration of civilians along the Zimbabwean lifelines to the Indian Ocean pose a security threat to the rail, road and pipeline as there is a possibility of infiltration by the MNR bandits.

Last week, Col Chiramba addressed Mozambican civilians at Nhamatanda, a small settlement along the Beira Corridor which is now being swollen by refugees and explained the purpose of the redeployment of ZNA troops.

He warned the Mozambicans not to allow the MNR bandits to infiltrate them as they would endanger the peace process that was under way.

However, the civilians were sceptical that the current process would bring an end to the 15 years of banditry that has claimed nearly one million lives.