

Malawi route under Renamo control?

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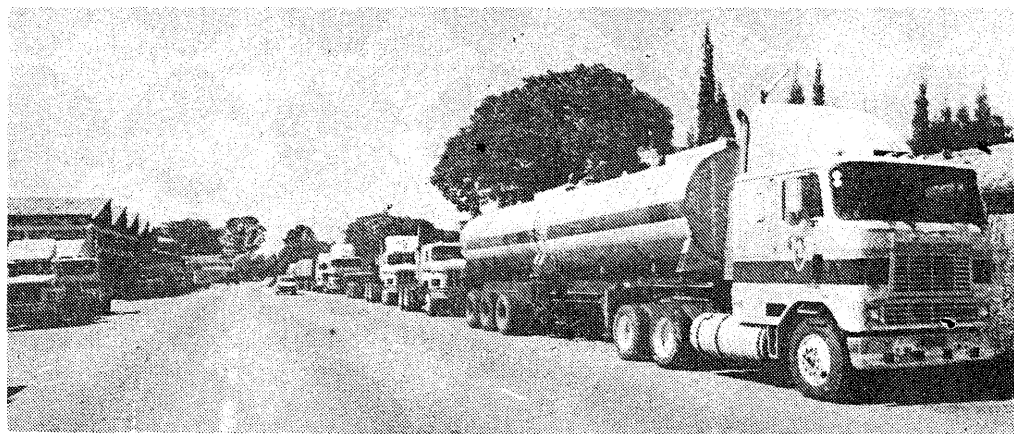
SOME units of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) operating along this border area are said this week to have taken effective control of the vital Nyamapanda-Lilongwe highway — a development, it is understood, that was calculated to strengthen the rebel movement's bargaining hand in the on-going peace negotiations with the Frelimo government.

At the same time, members of the rebel units reportedly have said that only Mozambican registered vehicles can be assured of safe passage through the 358 km highway they now reportedly control between the Zimbabwe-Malawi border posts.

In interviews at the Nyamapanda border post, Mozambican truck drivers said they had been stopped on several occasions this week alone by members of the rebel movement. The drivers said that they had been guaranteed safe passage as long as they did not travel in convoy with non-Mozambican registered vehicles — particularly Zimbabwean and Malawian registered vehicles.

"These people are very serious about what they are saying," said one driver, who works for the Mozambican-based TransCarga hauliers. "I was stopped twice this morning between Tete and this border post. On both occasions, they told me that I had nothing to fear because we were one and the same people. It's the Zimbabweans they are particularly after. But as things stand, I would warn anyone who isn't Mozambican against using this road."

The current situation was precipitated by an MNR attack last week on a convoy of Zimbabwean registered trucks near Tete in Mozambique. Two Zimbabwean drivers were killed in the ambush and the



Botswana registered trucks parked in Harare. They were destined for Malawi.

Malawi's lifeline, the 385 kilometre hell-run from Nyamapanda in north-east Zimbabwe through the MNR infested Tete province of Mozambique, to Lilongwe, has been disrupted since the bandits attacked a transport convoy last week. Farai Makotsi visited Nyamapanda this week, and now reports:

whereabouts of five other drivers are still unknown.

The current situation arose less than one month after the Frelimo government and the MNR signed a partial ceasefire. The terms of the ceasefire called for the Zimbabwe National Army, which in the past had escorted convoys of Zimbabwean trucks along the Tete road to and from the Malawi border, to withdraw.

"The MNR has always complained that had it not been for the presence of the ZNA in Mozambique the long drawn-out war would have ended long ago," said another TransCarga driver, who spoke in halting Shona. "First, they didn't like the presence of the ZNA, now they just don't want to see any Zimbabweans. It's as sim-

ple as that."

Meanwhile, the 150 vehicles that used to cross the border into Mozambique daily up to two weeks ago were nowhere in some MNR bandits had told that arrived at the border post soon made U-turns and headed back with their cargo.

"We are not gambling with our lives in situations like these," said one Zimbabwean trucker as he prepared to make the three-hour journey back to Harare.

An official at the immigration office at the border post confirmed that since Sunday no Zimbabwean truckers had crossed the border.

"As far as we're concerned, the border is open to anyone who wishes to go. But that decision to cross is taken by the

individuals who want to make the journey," said the official.

Malawian truck drivers appear to have been thrown into the same predicament as that facing Zimbabweans. While Mozambican truckers interviewed said that Malawians were not regarded with the same hostility as the Zimbabweans, none of them, however, was prepared to take a chance.

Villagers said that since the ceasefire agreement there had been a lull in MNR activities in the area. They said that eight this week. The few that arrived at the border post soon made U-turns and headed back with their cargo.

In the Nyahuku area, about 20 km north of the border post, one woman said, "I'm glad our soldiers pulled out of there. I hope they are not coming back because if they do that, then the bandits will come back here to kill our people."

Before the partial ceasefire was put into effect, the Nyahuku area had gained notoriety for MNR activity. Several families were killed and villages destroyed in MNR attacks, with the rebels using the kill-

leadership wants to control more ground before it finally sits down at the negotiating table. Others suggest that the MNR leadership has lost control over some of its units and that recent ceasefire agreement violations might have not been sanctioned by the leadership itself.

In Harare, a great sense of desperation is reportedly building up among those in the transport and haulage business.

"We are very much in the dark and we are bombarded every day with unverifiable information and speculation on what happens next," said one transport manager in Harare.

Meanwhile, Mr Chris Notley, an official with the Beira Corridor Group, said this week that transporters were paralysed. Until the situation changes, he said that the only alternative for Malawi-bound truckers was to go through Zambia.

"It's the only alternative there, but it is going to be too costly," Mr Notley said.