

Villagers flee Mozambique rebel attack

AT least 40 people were killed and scores injured when rebels attacked two settlements in southern Mozambique, sending thousands of villagers fleeing for safety into neighbouring South Africa, it was reported yesterday.

South African officials said about 2,000 men, women and children fled across the border into South Africa after Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) rebels attacked the town of Ressano Garcia, in Gaza province, on Tuesday night. The rebels used mortars, heavy machine guns and rocket launchers, officials said.

It was not clear if rebels or government force held the town.

At least 40 people, most of them children, were injured in the attack. South African army and police units treated the wounded after they crossed into South Africa, officials said.

The official Mozambique news agency, Aim, reported yesterday that 40 people were killed and 13 wounded when MNR forces attacked the "7 April" commune in Gaza province on Saturday, near the South African border.

Guerrillas set fire to houses and looted the village before being driven off by government troops, Aim said. Government forces killed two rebels, it said.

The news agency said it was one of the bloodiest incidents in southern Mozambique so far this year. Thousands have died in recent years in the war between Mozambique's government and the rebels, who are

backed by rightwing South African, Portuguese and US business groups.

A sixth round of peace talks between the government and the MNR is scheduled to begin today in Rome. The two sides are trying to agree on terms for a ceasefire and steps towards an election.

The government's chief negotiator, Armando Guebuza, said in Maputo before leaving for today's talks that the agenda centred on political issues.

The government has committed itself to elections and a multi-party political system, but the MNR has so far shown no preparedness for a political settlement which would mean an open electoral contest.

However, with an announcement yesterday from Luanda by the Angolan President, Jose Eduardo dos Santos, that the first stage of an agreement with Unita rebels was being signed in Portugal, hope rose for success in the Mozambican talks.