

# Trucks back on Tete route despite risks

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NYAMAPANDA.

**LONG-DISTANCE** haulage traffic is building up again on the hazardous Nyamapanda to Malawi route through Mozambique, but the situation remains dicey with some Zimbabwean drivers coming under MNR bandit attack just off the route about a week ago.

"It's a heads you win, tails you lose situation," one truck driver said at the border last week as he and five others waited to join a Mozambican army convoy. Whether the convoy would reach Zobue town on the border with Malawi was unpredictable, he said.

The route, a lifeline to landlocked Malawi and northern Mozambican towns cut off by bandit activity, was secured by Zimbabwean troops before they were ordered to withdraw under an agreement between the MNR and the Mozambican government in December last year.

Security on the route deteriorated rapidly after the withdrawal as the bandits repeatedly ambushed convoys. In one incident early this year, seven drivers were killed, while in another about 20 Mozambican troops and civilians were killed.

Traffic was reduced to a trickle as truckers switched to the long but secure Chirundu route through Zambia to reach Malawi. However, they are slowly returning to this dangerous but relatively cheaper route. Within the last four months, traffic has built up to 150 vehicles per trip on the twice-weekly convoy protected by Mozambican forces.

But that is no guarantee for safety. On Saturday September 21, six trucks belonging to Wheels of Africa carrying 180 tonnes of maize from Zimbabwe to Mandimba and under armed escort came under attack inside Mozambique

on the eastern side of the border with Malawi.

One of the drivers involved last week said they all abandoned the vehicles and ran for 10 km back to Malawi. The attack was repelled after the escort was reinforced by the local militia but several civilians were killed although all the drivers escaped.

The driver, who declined to be named, said the six had to walk another 10 km back to where they had left the trucks to offload them and return.

There has been no major attack on the convoys on the main route in recent months but the drivers say they saw tell-tale signs of bandit activity such as finding the road blocked with big stones.

If they wish, the bandits can be expected to open fire while the road is being cleared but some of the drivers think that the bandits will not dare attack because Mozambican troops manning the escort on the main route are better equipped.

The situation could change, however, with the onset of the rains when thick vegetation will provide more cover for the bandits and when it will be easier to lay mines on the wet tarmac.

Besides Mozambican trucks which have no alternative route to supply Tete and other northern Mozambican towns, Malawian truckers have also joined two Zimbabwean trucking companies in the drift back to the Tete Corridor.

Zimbabwean drivers said they were not being forced by their bosses to drive on the hazardous route but were being offered huge sums of money to undertake the journey.

"I wouldn't encourage other companies to return to this route now. This is war. Were it not for the money, I wouldn't be going," said one driver.

The MNR bandits have been stalling at the Rome peace talks with the government to end the devastating civil war.