

Mozambique's mystery explosion

THE most graphic account so far on international radio of a mysterious hi-tech escalation of the war in Mozambique came this week over a bad line to London from Maputo, the Mozambique capital.

The BBC's Network Africa correspondent had been interviewing doctors at the military hospital who are treating soldiers for burns and skin sores, sore throats and problems with their eyes after a "remarkable explosion" during a Frelimo attack on a Renamo base north of Maputo. Is Renamo turning to chemical weapons? If it is, who is supplying them? Or (here we go again) is there a "third force"?

Because the strange explosion, unlike anything that has ever happened before in the conflict between the government and Renamo, occurred close to Mozambique's border with South Africa (1,5km, in fact), the BBC correspondent confirmed there "is no question that there will be speculation" that South Africa could have been involved. But he added emphatically that he did not believe there would be "direct evidence" of this "for some time; if ever".

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Soldiers describe the explosion as a weird type of fireball that detonated fairly high above them. They say there was "intense heat" and many threw off their clothes in panic. Five died. Autopsies might prove whether the explosion was in fact caused by a chemical weapon.

What is extraordinary about the attack is that it is so totally unlike previous Renamo battle tactics. Invariably these have been relatively low-tech affairs; shoot-outs with guns and grenades. Never before, said the BBC correspondent, had there been

anything "on the scale of any photo-chemical attack". Nobody has been able to say exactly how it happened. They just agree it was "most remarkable and unusual". Renamo itself refused to comment.