

# Does Renamo possess chemical weapons ?

The Mozambican authorities believe that Renamo bandits may have used chemical weapons in a clash with Mozambican troops on 16 January, at Ngungwe, very near the border with the South African province of the Transvaal.

The incident took place on the third day of a battle for the key Renamo base of Ngungwe. This is a large complex covering a wide and mountainous area, just one and a half kilometres from the border, to which it is linked by a dirt road.

The army first stormed Ngungwe on 14 May 1990, but Renamo reoccupied the area the following year. Ngungwe is key for Renamo logistics: military equipment reaches the base from South Africa by road, and is then distributed to Renamo units operating throughout southern Mozambique.

In mid-January, the army tried again to storm Ngungwe, but on 16 January, a commando unit was hit by an unknown weapon which killed five soldiers and injured ten others.

The survivors, who spoke to AIM from their hospital beds on 24 January, told of a projectile that exploded in the air, releasing a dense cloud of black smoke that provoked great pain and irritation.

Second lieutenant Joaquim Jonasse said the projectile exploded 50 or 75 metres above the soldiers' heads. The immediate effect of the smoke or gas was a sensation of great heat.

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"Some of the men were going crazy"

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"It became very hot", he said. "Some of the men were going crazy, tearing off their clothes, digging holes to bury themselves".

He added that the sensation of heat lasted throughout the day and the following night. The survivors felt very tired and very thirsty. When they did reach water, on the morning of 17 January, some of them vomited. All were feeling chest pains.

The soldiers reached their base at Corumane later that day, and were then taken to hospital. Lt Jonasse recalled that on arrival in the Maputo Military Hospital, he was vomiting blood. He said "now I feel a bit better, but I still have a pain in my chest".

Interviewed in a separate room, Alberto Jorge, a soldier in the third battalion of commandos, told essentially the same story of "a bomb" that exploded in the air, releasing "black smoke".

He said he had experienced difficulty in breathing, and that the smoke gave off a smell that reminded him "of being on board a boat at sea".

Mr Jorge said his eyesight and digestion has been affected. He said he had difficulty in seeing further than a few metres, and in eating solid foods. He complained of continuing headaches.

Both men said that shortly before the mid-air explosion a light aircraft entered from South Africa and was circling over the Ngungwe area. Lt Jonasse believed the plane was in communication with a vehicle that had also crossed the border.

They said, however, that the projectile had not been dropped from an aircraft, but had been fired from the direction of the South African border. The soldiers

had been descending a slope, and could not be sure whether the projectile had been fired from a Renamo position inside Mozambique, or from South African territory.

The incident led to the urgent summoning of the Mozambique/South Africa Joint Security Commission established in terms of the 1984 Nkomati non-aggression accord. The commission met in Maputo on 21 January, and the delegations were led by the commanders of the two armies, Gen George Meiring for South Africa, and Lt-Gen Tobias Dai for Mozambique.

No statement was issued from this meeting, but the following day a team of South African doctors,



Lt Joaquim Jonasse speaks to reporters from his hospital bed (AIM/Ferhat Momade)

both civilian and military, arrived to take samples from the victims for chemical analysis.

Experts from Mozambique and from European countries are also involved in the investigation to determine the exact nature of the substance used against the commandos.

Further confirmation came from a Renamo defector who told a Maputo press conference on 3 February that he had spoken with Renamo paratroopers who had boasted about chemical weapons.

This man, Victorino Fernandes, a former soldier demobilised from the Mozambique army in 1986, said he had been kidnapped by Renamo on 5 August 1991, when bandits ambushed his car on the road from Maputo to Swaziland.

He had been pressganged into Renamo and had spent the next six months in various bandit bases in Maputo province.

Mr Fernandes said that, on 22 January, a group of 350 reinforcements arrived at the Matixixi base in Marracuene district, about 40 kilometres from Maputo city. These men had come from Ngungwe and they included 50 paratroops.

The paratroops were all carrying gas masks, which had a mouthpiece linked by a tube to a small oxygen bottle. They told Mr Fernandes these were necessary protection against a weapon they were carrying, which was a projectile that could be fired from a heavy machine gun.

This projectile released a poisonous substance, which, if inhaled in sufficient quantity could kill. People further away from the impact would faint, or be severely weakened.

The paratroops boasted that they had used this weapon on 16 January during the battle for Ngungwe.

Mr Fernandes himself visited the Ngungwe base in December, when he was among a Renamo group sent to pick up ammunition there. While at Ngungwe he witnessed eight people being dropped by parachute. He recognised one of them as Renamo commander-in-chief, Afonso Dhlakama.

He said that other people at the base later confirmed to him that the eight had been Dhlakama, his wife and six bodyguards.

A military helicopter then arrived, with a crew of three men, two white and one black. They picked up Dhlakama and his companions and immediately flew them into South Africa.

Mr Fernandes said a thriving trade exists between Ngungwe and South Africa. Trucks with South African number plates drive the one and a half kilometres from the border to the base, where they pick up large quantities of firewood cut deeper inside Mozambique. The truck drivers pay Renamo for this in rands.

Other South African traders do not actually cross into Mozambique, but sell goods on the border to the people who live in and around Ngungwe.

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### Paratroops trained in South Africa

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The Renamo paratroops told Mr Fernandes that they had been trained in South Africa, at Phalaborwa in the eastern Transvaal. The commander of the Matixixi base, a man known as "Mabaioneta", also said he had been trained at Phalaborwa.

Much of the South African logistical support for Renamo has come from Phalaborwa, where the Fifth Reconnaissance Commando ("Five Recce"), a notorious dirty tricks unit of the South African Armed Forces, is based (see, for example, *Mozambiquefile* No. 181).

The Matixixi base was set up in order to launch raids from an easy distance into the Maputo suburbs. But on 23 January, the day after Mr Fernandes' discussion with the paratroops, the Mozambican army attacked the base, and Mr Fernandes took advantage of the confusion to escape. He made his way to Marracuene town, where he handed himself over to local militiamen.

Before returning to civilian life in 1986, Mr Fernandes had had a distinguished career in the army and the security service. He had served in the department that protects high-ranking officials, and had been one of the late President Samora Machel's bodyguards. He had kept this well-hidden from Renamo. "If they found out, they would have killed me", he said.

He said that many of Renamo's units in Maputo province consist of young boys. In one Renamo base, known as Matade-2, there were about 100 minors with full military training. "These children have grown up with Renamo and they understand nothing", he said.

Mr Fernandes confirmed that speakers of Ndaou, a central Mozambican language, dominate Renamo. Although the languages commonly spoken in Maputo province are Shangaan and Ronga, the Renamo leadership enforced the use of Ndaou in their camps. Mr Fernandes could understand most of what was said since his mother tongue is Shona, and Ndaou is essentially a Shona dialect.