

The 'black cloud' of death in Mozambique

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THE "black cloud" which recently killed at least 28 government troops and villagers and left scores more fighting for breath in the Mozambican bush bears a remarkable similarity to expertly verified toxic clouds which killed and maimed during the Angolan war.

Medical and military experts — from South Africa, Mozambique, Britain, Holland, America and France — are still analysing what sort of terrifying weapon exploded above Mozambican soldiers on January 16 this year, close to the South African border. When eyewitness accounts of the Mozambican and Angolan incidents are compared, there are sinister similarities.

The SADF said yesterday its analysis had shown no evidence of chemical weapons being used.

The Angolan incidents were analysed by West European experts in 1990 and they concluded that Angolan government forces did fire

toxic missiles during their war against Unita — missiles banned under the 1925 Geneva Convention — and that the chemical weapons originated in the Soviet Union.

Tests now being conducted on survivors and the corpses of those who were killed at Ngungwe, about 10 km from the South African border, may reveal that Renamo has acquired a taste for unconventional chemical or biological weapons — often referred to as the "poor man's atom bomb".

Both Mozambicans and Angolan survivors of "black cloud" attacks speak in awe of an explosion in mid-air followed by a dense cloud.

Survivors carry no obvious injuries but speak of intense heat, chest pains, difficulty in breathing, headaches, loss of eyesight and vomiting blood.

In both cases, in Angola and Mozambique, the "cloud" was directed at enemy troops — but inevitably civilians suffered.

Alindo Lopes, director of the Mo-

zambican Information Ministry, this week revealed that at least eight villagers had died and 12 had been injured in the Ngungwe attack. The press has been barred from the area.

At least 20 government soldiers were killed by the mysterious fumes and 10 seriously injured.

In April 1990 West European experts announced that they had found evidence that Angolan government forces had used chemical weapons during their 15-year fight against the Unita rebels of Jonas Savimbi.

Attacks

"The accounts given by victims, and the analysis of samples by three different toxicologists, suggests that chemical compounds were used," the team of four professors from Belgium, Austria, Innsbruck and Madrid, said in a joint statement.

In Angola, some bombs were

found to contain phosphine, a chemical which attacks the nervous system.

Belgium's Professor A Heyndrickx — part of the Angolan analysis team — said at the time that he felt a new type of chemical was being deployed.

He travelled to Russia, where the Soviets admitted supplying toxic weapons.

They argued that the bomb supplied could not be called a chemical weapon because it fell outside the 1925 Geneva Convention definition of chemical warfare.

Professor Heyndrickx said the Soviets had defined the explosive as an incendiary bomb and he called for an "urgent" re-definition of the Geneva Convention's data on chemical warfare "to prevent this type of weapon being supplied".

In the Mozambican incident, American diplomatic sources said South African involvement "was one of the angles being studied", but declined to comment further

on their investigation.

If Renamo has chemical capabilities, where could they have come from? That is the question military experts are asking.

Specialist military writer Helmut Heitman said he could only speculate on where Renamo could have purchased chemical weapons.

Control

"The Soviets were in the market but I doubt whether they would have been talking to Renamo.

"It is possible, however, that control of such weapons has slackened since the break-up of the Soviet Union. In that case Renamo could have dealt through a third party," he speculated.

Mozambican authorities are reluctant to point fingers at South Africa but did allow a press conference to take place in Maputo, where a Renamo defector, Victorino Fernandes, revealed that he had been a Renamo paratrooper

trained by the SADF and that he had come across Renamo troops carrying gas masks in the Ngungwe vicinity shortly before the attack.

The troops told him they had been given the masks by the SADF because of the "dangerous weapons" they were carrying.

A Ngungwe survivor, Lieutenant Joaquim Jonasse, said the missile had been fired from the ground from the direction of the South African border but was unable to say which side of the border it was fired from.

Yesterday a spokesman for the SA Defence Force said their investigation into allegations that chemical weapons were used in Mozambique on January 16 had shown an "unusual incident" but there was no evidence that chemical weapons had been used.

Neither the symptoms of 10 of the injured, nor post-mortems on two of the dead, had shown signs of known chemical agents.