

## AFRICA

# Convoy on corridor of fear

*In former, peaceful times, Tete was a bustling trucking route — one of the lifelines of southern Africa. Today, it is among the most dangerous stretches of road anywhere in the world.*

By **HAMILTON WENDE**

**T**HE narrow strip of road that runs through the Zambezi valley between Zobe in Mozambique and Nyamapanda in Zimbabwe is known as the Tete corridor. At least twice a month convoys are attacked, often more frequently, by Renamo rebels.

Figures are hard to come by. The only real source of information is from the truckers who do the route, but it is mostly rumour that has been passed from driver to driver. There is little or no media coverage of them — it's just another little Third-World war.

The collection point for the convoy is near a Frelimo army outpost about 20km inside the Mozambique border. A few officers lounge in the shade of a low-walled rondavel. From the bush around us emerges a number of teenage soldiers dressed in a motley array of faded camouflage fatigues, T-shirts, slip-slops and combat boots. All are armed with AK-47s and other weapons and they go from truck to truck, begging for anything they can get from the drivers.

It is 7am. Already the sweat is running down the face of Laxton, the driver who has agreed to give me a lift. Without any visible signal, the trucks in front of us start moving off into the heat and we follow. Only a few kilometres down the road we start to see evidence of the war that has wracked this country for more than 17 years. Every building is pockmarked with holes from AK-47 fire. Then we see our first evidence of more recent attacks: a huge load of bottles lies smashed in a glittering heap on the side of the road, the tarmac black and burnt from rocket fire.

"The *matsangas* (bandits) hit them first with RPGs and then they came out of the bush and stabbed them with bayonets to teach them a lesson," says Laxton. "They killed women too, chopped them dead with pangas."

About 50km out of Zobe is the most dangerous part of the journey. The bush is thick — mostly mopani



**Sign of the times ... One of the many vehicles littering the Tete corridor**

— and the district is remote.

There is one bad stretch where, for about 20km, every 500m or so there is a burned-out vehicle lying in the bush. The soldiers ride up and down in their armoured vehicles peering anxiously into the bush, holding their weapons at the ready. The convoy of more than a hundred trucks is five or six kilometres long. With only three vehicles guarding the convoy — one APC and two seven-ton trucks with 188mm machine guns mounted on the back — there are long periods of time when you are completely unprotected.

After two hours of tension-filled driving we pull into Tete. The APC comes screaming past us, headlights flashing, the horn blowing. Soldiers give the "thumbs up" sign at the drivers as they pass them. We are in Frelimo-secured territory again. Safe. That night we sleep in Tete on the banks of the Zambezi.

At 6am the convoy starts to gather on the outskirts of town. The landscape is a red sandy plain dotted with thick knobby baobabs. All along the road on this section are children begging, their hands outstretched towards the trucks: "Driver, driver ... Please bread, please bread ... tobacco? ... shirt? ..." The children's expressions contort in anger and disappointment as, one by one, the trucks crawl past them blowing dust and hot, reeking

diesel fumes into their faces.

Further on, the bush becomes thicker. A burned-out cab lies next to the blackened remains of a lala palm tree. The mood starts to tighten. The possibility of an attack puts everyone on edge.

In a shallow depression filled with white sand and sun-bleached grass there are the scorched remains of a Land Rover hit by an RPG-7 rocket. It was hit yesterday, but nobody seems to know what happened to the occupants.

Twenty kilometres from the Zimbabwe border we come around a bend in the road. A column of thick black smoke billows into the air. All along the rise of the hill, trucks are stopped and the drivers standing on the far edge of the road, peering nervously ahead. There are no troops anywhere near. A few drivers are gathered in anxious, jittery knots. The air is abuzz with a mix of Shona, English and Portuguese. Many of the drivers are on the verge of unhitching their loads and doing a U-turn.

A few hundred metres on, there is a trailer burning furiously on the side of the road. A group of Frelimo soldiers is standing guard over it, AK-47s at the hip.

A short distance beyond that is a horse standing without a trailer. Everybody gets out to gather around the driver and ask him what happened.

He doesn't know. He looked in his mirror and saw his cargo in flames. His hands are cut and bleeding from releasing his trailer so quickly.

His freight was bales of cotton, so the likely explanation for the fire is spontaneous combustion. But not everyone is convinced.

At the border, the incoming convoy meets up with the outgoing one. Two hundred or more trucks — 6,000 tons of cargo caught up in a bureaucratic eddy of paperwork.

A kilometre down the road into Zimbabwe is a pub. Lucky Dube blares out of speakers on the wall, a snooker table in the corner, and young women sitting at the bar. The talk is all about the corridor. Who saw what, and where — a scorched wreck that hadn't been there last time, a rustle someone saw in the mopani that turned out to be a hornbill — how scared nobody was. And, of course, what happened yesterday and last week with the rockets, the bayonets and the pangas and what might have happened today...

It was only the fire this trip, but who knows about next time? There are too many burnt-out wrecks along the road to think that it can't happen to you. But jobs are scarce these days. Laxton's wife and two daughters are waiting back home in Harare, and the danger pay for driving the Tete is Zim\$500 a trip.