

Southern Africa News Features

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AVERAGE AGE OF ATTACKERS: 15 YEARS

by David Martin

As the Mozambique peace talks in Rome prepare to focus on military matters, including a ceasefire, brutal attacks have escalated sharply in the south of the country -- carried out by large groups of teenaged boys.

The Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or Renamo) has a well-documented history of kidnapping young children, giving them military training and forcing them to kill, and these young children are used increasingly in attacks in the southern provinces, especially around the capital, Maputo.

In over a dozen attacks into Maputo's outlying suburbs in recent months, the story told by a wide range of eyewitnesses is always the same: a very large group of teenagers numbering as many as 200-300 with a handful of commanders between 20 and 30 years.

The people we talked to in the suburbs, as well as others interviewed by the local news agency, AIM, at the time of the attacks, gave the average age of the attackers as 15 years. That means some are older -- and some are younger.

This defiance of international standards of human rights, and of the United Nations charter on the rights of the child, seems to go unheeded and unpunished, despite the proliferation of organizations and governments now giving lip service to human rights issues.

One of the victims of an attack in early May on a suburb of Xai-Xai, capital of Gaza province, told AIM that most of the raiders, who looted homes, murdered two people and kidnapped a number of others, were young boys between the ages of 12 and 14. The person who gave these details was abducted by them, but managed to escape.

In an earlier raid on a village north of Maputo, a similar group looted the scant possessions of the residents -- food, cooking utensils and clothing -- without incident. As they were leaving, however, one of the group expressed dissatisfaction that they had not killed anyone.

So they returned and lined up the villagers. The boy who had complained then stabbed three people to death with a bayonet. According to an eyewitness, the killer was 10 or 11 years old.

This horrific story was told by surviving villagers to pastors at a nearby seminary. "Children of 16 or 18 years are now too old for Renamo," one of the pastors said.

He spoke on the understanding that neither he nor his seminary would be identified for fear of reprisal attacks on the villages nearby. "Most of our seminarians are about 20 years old and they know they would be killed by Renamo because they are too old. The younger the children, the easier they are to control."

He spoke a few days after 23 lay catechists were murdered at a Catholic training centre near the city of Inhambane. They were among 14 families who had just arrived at the Guiua centre to begin their training.

Renamo's ideal recruiting age, the pastor said, is boys of about eight years old. "They are forced to witness or participate in the killing of a parent or close relative. Then there is no going back to the village. They have no other family but Renamo, and must obey orders.

"They are terrified and traumatized. The ethos is that you can eat if you have got a gun."

A senior Western diplomat, who had just interviewed two captured Renamo operatives whom he described as "in their early teens", told a story about children even younger being used for sabotage.

At Ressano Garcia, where the railway line crosses from South Africa, children aged 7 or 8 years have been used to disable trains which then derail during their journey to Maputo. "They send these children under the trains at night equipped with knives to cut the brake cables," he said. "At that age, in the dark, they are less likely to bang their heads on the underside of the train."

Another unimaginable story from Gaza province, told by a Maputo resident who had recently visited his relatives there, was of a child with a knife being allowed by his Renamo commander to cut open a pregnant woman's stomach "to find out what was inside". Both the woman and her baby died.

One of the doctors who was involved in establishing centres for traumatized children in Maputo some years ago is bewildered at the prospect of having to do this on a nation-wide scale.

He said it was a very costly process, made possible only with the assistance of psychologists seconded from other countries as part of an aid programme. "Mozambique does not have the skills or the financial resources to undertake such a programme on a national scale."

The centres, which deal with psychological as well as physical needs, have been very successful in rehabilitated young children affected by the war and resettling them with relatives or families willing to take them in. However, they have managed to deal with only a few thousand of well over 200,000 children estimated to be orphaned or separated from their families.

The number of children that Renamo has under arms is not known, and young adults who have grown up with this culture of killing and atrocity will need a type of rehabilitation that is not readily available in Mozambique. This aspect of the aftermath of the brutality of the war in Mozambique has defied comparison, with Cambodia often given as the only possible similarity.

Rumours are beginning to surface that Renamo is keeping its older military cadres outside the country, in South Africa, Kenya or Malawi, to prepare for integration into a national army or to be held in reserve in case a ceasefire fails or Renamo does not win elections. But these rumours are difficult to verify.

It is known that last year a large contingent of Renamo forces were training at a military base in Kenya, allegedly for the purpose of forming a future Presidential Guard. Some of these forces were later infiltrated into northern Mozambique via Malawi.

The next round of talks in Rome between the government and MNR is expected to centre on military matters, including a ceasefire. But some of the children whom MNR has trained may have gone "freelance".

A western diplomat in Maputo estimates that there are about one million guns in the country, most supplied from South Africa. Even if a bounty of US\$ 10-15 were offered for each weapon surrendered, he speculated that less than 15 percent of weapons would be handed in.

A ceasefire may cause more of the children to go "freelance", he said, for they may have no other means of survival, adding that Renamo's control over them in those circumstances may be in doubt.

"Would these children, even if agreement can be reached, heed a ceasefire?" (SARDC)

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