

# Mozambique in turmoil as Renamo battles for control of key areas

Fin 643  
11/1/91

AS the Mozambican joint verification commission (JVC), monitoring the December partial ceasefire between the Frelimo government and Renamo met in Maputo this week, there are conflicting reports over the control of the strategic Gorongosa area.

The area, which has the much-coveted Cassa Banana base, was the scene of bitter fighting throughout last week and initial reports indicated that it had fallen to the rebels by New Year's Day, barely seven days after the Zimbabwe National Army handed it over to Frelimo.

Mozambican military commanders quickly denied this, arguing that their forces had managed to repulse the heavy enemy attack.

"We despatched more troops to the area because of the heavy assaults on our positions there," said one commander.

But villagers interviewed while fleeing to Gondola within the Beira Corridor, allegedly seeking protection from Zimbabweans, said most of the people at Cassa Banana had surrendered to Renamo as fighting became intense.

"The situation is very bad. Food is running short and more and more Renamo troops are going there," said Margarita Tome, a displaced mother of four, who escaped the fighting.

Ms Tome said the food was running short because relief organisations were no longer sending out any food there. "They say there is not security for their officers and the trucks. Security for convoys was previously provided for by Zimbabweans," she said.

So, who is in control of Cassa Banana? "It is not possible to know exactly what is happening there at every minute because of the communication problem. But, I am confident that we are still in control of the base," said Bernard Ndebu, one of the commanders.

The base, according to the villagers, was attacked by a large force from one of the main Renamo bases at Nyanjera, 30 km from Dondo. This base, said to

straddle across a 5 km radius, is also supported by a number of other makeshift bases.

"Renamo had minimised the number of its permanent bases since Zimbabweans started launching massive offensive operations against them. They were using makeshift bases and are now consolidating their positions," said a captured rebel, Maximilo Doeroi.

## From Our Beira Correspondent

Lt. Col. Arminto Chicamisse, the Sofala provincial commander, could neither confirm nor deny that Cassa Banana was no longer in Frelimo's hands, preferring to refer all queries to the military headquarters in Maputo.

Chicamisse, who commands the area covering the hot spots of Cavalho, Machesse, Larmego, Muda, Villa Paiva de Andrade, Vandusi and Mezimbite, said all he could say was that his troops were on top of the situation.

Asked about the re-inforcements seen heading for the 50 km Gorongosa range, Chicamisse said: "We have deployed a lot of forces both in that area and in Tete because there are numerous reports indicating that the enemy is regrouping around those areas, particularly Cassa Banana."

Renamo appears to have realised that they lost political ground among the Mozambican people because of their brutal methods. They wanted to do so while the talks were under way and its leadership has since realised that Zimbabwe's presence was a hindrance to this programme.

"Zimbabweans had to give way, according to that argument, for Renamo to gain ground militarily. This would enable them to abduct large numbers of civilians to their side because the message they are telling the people is that they should not flee when they see their troops. They are saying the war is about to end and people should work with them," said Ndebu.

The other Renamo argument was that

the port city of Beira should be designated an area outside the corridor. "They said they would be prepared to leave the oil terminal alone, once the city falls outside that definition," said a Zimbabwean officer close to the members of the JVC.

If the war in Mozambique is to be won militarily, then this will be at Cassa Banana. This base was sited by Rhodesians in 1978 when Renamo was created and, the following year, there was heavy fighting there between Frelimo and the nascent rebel force, resulting in the death of Renamo's founder leader Andre Matsangaisse. Matsangaisse's name has since been associated with the rebels, who are commonly known as the "matsangas".

Renamo fought back for two years, recapturing the base in 1981, developing it with South African assistance and eventually using it as its main headquarters for the next five years.

In 1986, Zimbabweans overran the base and gave it back to Frelimo, but they lost it on four other subsequent occasions. On each of these occasions, Zimbabweans defeated Renamo and gave the base to the Mozambique armed forces (FAM). The last time Zimbabweans recaptured the base was about two years ago, and this time they decided to stay. They only left on December 23 because of the partial ceasefire agreement.

Today, the Zimbabwean soldiers do not know what is happening in that area because of their confinement to the Beira Corridor.

Last week Renamo attacked the railway line between Mutare and Beira on two occasions. They also hit the Limpopo line at Chokwe. Zimbabwean soldiers said they believed the attacks were designed to divert their attention from Cassa Banana and other parts of Gorongosa in the event of Frelimo enlisting their help.

During the attacks at Muda and Mafambise, near Beira, the rebels murdered seven civilians, wounded two others and looted vast amounts of property.