

MNR threat looms

**BRENDAN
NICHOLSON**

**Pretoria News
Africa Service**

A SKIRMISH between Zimbabwean troops and anti-Frelimo guerrillas in Mozambique has underlined the growing danger of the rebels, allegedly backed by South Africa, clashing with the forces of several "front-line" states.

Though otherwise inconsequential, the shootout appears to have been the first acknowledged contact between the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) and troops of a Mozambican ally drawn into the conflict to protect its economic interests.

When the three companies of Zimbabwean soldiers were sent to Mozambique in mid-November they joined an estimated several thousand Tanzanian troops sent by President Julius Nyerere to reinforce the Frelimo forces.

Two other Mozambican neighbours, Zambia and Malawi, are believed to have been asked by President Samora Michel's government to send troops, though there is no evidence yet that any have arrived.

Deployed

However, in a recent radio broadcast an MNR spokesman claimed Zambian troops had been deployed already.

The skirmish in question took place on Friday evening when guerrillas launched a mortar attack on a pumping station about half way along the pipeline that carries most of Zimbabwe's fuel supplies from Beira to Mutare (formerly Umtali).

The attackers were beaten off before they could do any damage, by Zimbabwean troops stationed at Maforga to protect the 288 km fuel lifeline.

Though the possibility of Zimbabwean military involvement in the Mozambican conflict has been discussed for years Prime Minister Robert Mugabe is believed to have been forced into taking action after the MNR blew up the Maforga pipeline pumping station on October 11. At the same time the MNR kidnapped three Portuguese technicians and their families.

The Portuguese were later released but maintenance workers refused to go back to the pipeline without protection.

Gunship

Now they are escorted in and out of Mozambique by troops and helicopter gunships.

Zimbabwe's position worsened when saboteurs blew up part of the Beira fuel tank farm causing a highly damaging fuel shortage in Zimbabwe just before Christmas.

Other Zimbabwe imports have also been disrupted by MNR attacks on road and rail routes from Beira and Maputo, increasing Harare's dependence on the southward routes through South Africa.

The MNR radio station, Radio Free Africa (the Voice of

the Hyena to those on the receiving end), has at least twice warned that the movement would begin attacking Zimbabwean targets if the Mugabe government continued providing military support to Mozambique.

Zimbabwe is not the only black-ruled southern Africa state with a vital interest in Mozambique's security situation.

Without the Mozambican ports, landlocked Zambia must rely on South Africa to help shift the huge "overflow" from the inefficient Tanzam railway to Dar es Salaam.

Pretoria News

13/1/83