

War and Death in Gile

by Gil Lauriciano

In the ruined town of Gile, in the central Mozambican province of Zambezia, a group of soldiers, ignoring the weight of their guns and uniforms, amuse themselves with a game of football.

Nearby, several others try to press their ears to a "Xirico", one of Mozambique's locally assembled radios, whose spluttering batteries still allow something to be heard.

At night, soldiers can be heard shouting, singing, and dancing to the sound of drums. From none of this could one readily imagine that Gile is supposed to be one of the "hottest" zones of Zambezia, a place from which South Africa's MNR bandits were only expelled six months ago.

"Gile is a war zone, my friend", said one young soldier, trying to explain the abnormalities of the town - which include a curfew, a complex system of trenches, some of which go right up to residents' doors, and grave difficulties for aircraft which have to circle high above Gile before receiving guarantees that it is safe for them to land.

The curfew lasts from 18.00 local time to 08.00 the following morning. When the curfew is over, the daily life of the 38,000 displaced people living in Gile begins. Some are receiving para-military training for self-defence, some are cleaning and rebuilding parts of the town, others risk a journey out into the surrounding bush to collect wood or grass for building, or even food from their old, and now abandoned, homes.

Between the walls of what used to be schools hundreds of children are attending pre-school classes. The authorities hope to restart primary education in Gile in 1989, if the military situation allows. All the children wear the same clothes - loincloths made out of pieces of flattened tree bark.

The most crowded places in Gile are the cemetery and the two health posts. From August to November an epidemic of measles swept through Gile, and the final death toll stands at 1,500. Funerals continue regularly. Throughout the day groups of people are burying relatives who have fallen victim to diseases which will take great effort by the health services to overcome.

The health posts regularly treat diseases of malnutrition such as marasmus, as well as cases of measles, anaemia, bilharzia and many others.

In the large agglomeration of huts, where the displaced are living, vaccination brigades swim against the tide, trying to stave off the worst that the precarious health situation in Gile threatens. Walking through the maze of huts, one comes across people stretched out on the ground, obviously extremely ill or starving.

Like other districts in upper Zambezia, during the colonial period Gile was a source of cheap labour for the tea plantations of Gurue and Milange, and sugar plantations of Luabo. With Mozambican independence in 1975, this forced migration stopped, and the district became one of the major producers of cotton, maize and cassava in Zambezia.

The first bandit incursions into Gile district took place in 1983, and in that year localities in the interior of the district began to fall under MNR control. In 1985 and 1986, the small Mozambican military force in Gile was unable to confront successfully the massive bandit offensive into Zambezia unleashed from Malawian soil.

"The major attacks began on 3 October 1985", recalls the Frelimo Party district secretary for defence, Ernesto Ntalausse. "On that day they came en masse, and managed to seize the town. We reorganised ourselves in the mountains, and managed to reoccupy the town, though already some of the houses were destroyed".

Attacks continued, said Mr Ntalausse, and still the small force in Gile did not receive reinforcements. On 10 February 1986 the bandits returned, and murdered the district administrator. On 28 October 1986, while the town was following, as far as possible, the funeral in Maputo of President Samora Machel, the bandits struck again, and occupied the town. This time they stayed.

"We were greatly weakened, and we didn't have the means to organise a counter-attack", said Mr Ntalausse. "The only thing we could do was flee into the bush, where we stayed until the district was retaken on 10 July this year".

After they had seized Gile, the bandits put former collaborators with Portuguese colonialism back into power in the villages. Their task was to extract food from the local people, recruit youngsters into the bandit ranks, and organise columns to transport looted goods

to other bases and into Malawi. They also denounced those whom the MNR have always considered as priority targets - teachers, nurses, and members of the local political and administrative structures.

It was not long before the people were suffering", Mr Ntalausse told AIM. "The bandits destroyed the hospital, and took away all the goods that the people had, including the very clothes they were wearing. Then, even with the threats that the bandits made, the people began to disappear, slipping away a few at a time into the bush, or into neighbouring districts such as Pebane and Morrumpula".

Cristina Virginia Luanda told AIM how at the beginning of 1988 the bandits had rounded up people from the bush and forced them into Gile town, where "they obliged us to clean up the airstrip, because they had spoken with the Red Cross to bring in food and clothing".

(Ms Luanda was presumably referring to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has admitted flying supplies to bandit zones in Sofala province, but has not undertaken such activity in Zambezia, as far as is known).

"We were waiting for a week", said Ms Luanda. "They had come from a base of theirs at Mucunanari, including a chief of theirs called Manuel. But since the Red Cross plane never arrived, they forced the people to dig up the airstrip again, and afterwards they laid mines there".

On the morning of 10 July the bandits were surprised by helicopters of the Mozambican air force. After an ariel bombardment the helicopters unloaded special units of the Mozambican army who ensured the retaking of Gile town.

That day, through the sound of the fighting, and through people freed from bandit captivity in camps around the town, most of the people hidden in the bush came to know that Gile was back under Mozambican control. Two days later about 35,000 people had already made their way into Gile town.

"Out there in the bush we never completely lost control of our people", said Carvalho Nihatchamana, chairman of the Gile town council. "The people even protected us from the bandits, denying that we were officials". When Mr Nihatchamana received confirmation that Gile had been retaken "we began to march towards the town".

A month later, on 11 August, Gile experienced what is described as one of the biggest battles fought in Zambezia. One of the MNR's top commanders, the self-styled "general" Calisto Meque, led a force

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of three battalions (amounting to about 1,000 men) and for seven hours tried to wrest back control of the town.

At about midday the battle ended in celebration for the Mozambican troops, as they paraded the body of Calisto Meque on a stretcher through the town. They could show the people of Gile the body of one of their principal tormentors, the man who for several years had been the principal bandit chief in Zambezia. Meque was killed along with 38 of his men.

For the MNR, Gile was of considerable importance as a route into the southern districts of Nampula province. Having already lost the coastal districts, the loss of Gile also meant that the bandits were further removed from the sea and the possibility of resupplies by boat.

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