



WASHINGTON NOTES ON AFRICA

SPRING 1983

Pretoria's War Against Mozambique

by Allen Isaacman

The war in Southern Africa is escalating. The highly publicized South African attack on the Mozambican capital of Maputo and Pretoria's continued saber-rattling against its African neighbors suggest that this region is likely to become a terrain of increasing international conflict. The apartheid regime's attempt to redefine the conflict in Cold War terms, describing its borders with Angola and Mozambique as "its first and second fronts against communism," carries ominous implications in terms of a broader global conflict.

What is often overlooked is that the May 23rd air attack against Mozambique, in which a number of Mozambican civilians were killed and wounded, is part of South Africa's long-term strategy to intimidate and cripple the young nation. This strategy dates back to 1974 even before that country had become independent, when senior South African officials contemplated a preemptive attack against Mozambique to prevent FRELIMO (the Mozambican Liberation Movement) from coming to power. In the end a sharply divided South African government concluded that such a strategy was not feasible, although it did give at least tacit support to an abortive white settler coup which occurred in September 1974.

Instead, South African policy-makers chose to put increasing economic and military pressure on Mozambique to ensure that the government of Samora Machel could not threaten the racist regime. Since FRELIMO inherited an economy which was totally dependent on South Africa, Pretoria was able to exert such pressure with ease. Shortly after independence, for example, it cut the number of Mozambican laborers working in the gold mines from over 100,000 to 30,000, depriving the new government of its single most important source of hard currency. The apartheid regime has also redirected high value South African exports away from the port of Maputo and has threatened to build a new Indian Ocean facility to replace Maputo entirely.

But it is in the military sphere where South African pressure has been most devastating. As early as 1976, South African intelligence, together with its Rhodesian counterparts, helped to organize an anti-FRELIMO fifth column comprised of

former Portuguese secret police and ex-colonial troops, disaffected settlers and mercenaries which became the basis of the Mozambique National Resistance. The Secretary General of the MNR, Orlando Christina, for example, was a high-level secret police official during the colonial period. To this initial group were added ex-FRELIMO guerrillas who had been expelled for corruption or who had left because of unfulfilled personal ambition. Andre Matzangaissa and Alfonso Dhlakama, two former FRELIMO soldiers, received prominent positions to give the MNR visible Black leadership.

By 1978, from its bases in Rhodesia, the MNR was plundering agricultural cooperatives, burning schools and medical centers, interdicting railroad lines, disrupting commerce, attacking major economic projects and effectively paralyzing FRELIMO's efforts to improve the quality of life in the countryside.

With the fall of the Ian Smith regime in Rhodesia, the South African military transferred MNR headquarters and bases to the Transvaal, a northern province adjacent to Mozambique. These operations were witnessed at the time by a British military team under Lieutenant General John Achland who was supervising the transition to independence in Zimbabwe. Shortly thereafter, MNR commander Alfonso Dhlakama boasted to Portuguese journalists that South African Defense Minister Magnus Malan had made him a colonel and assured him that "your army is now part of the South African Defense Force."

Whereas the Rhodesian government used the MNR to collect information on Zimbabwean nationalist operations and to intimidate refugees who had fled to Mozambique, South Africa saw the roving bands as instruments of havoc. At a meeting between Dhlakama and Colonel Van Niekerk of South African security on October 25, 1980 at Zoabostad, a military base in the Transvaal, the MNR Commander unveiled plans to reestablish bases inside Mozambique, and to attack both the railroad lines between Beira and Zimbabwe and road traffic on the national north-south highway. Van Niekerk insisted that this was not sufficient. By the end of 1981 he ordered them to "interdict rail traffic from Malverne-Gwelo

[southern Mozambique], establish bases inside Mozambique adjacent to the South African border, open a new military front in Maputo province, and provoke incidents in Maputo and Beira." The South African strategy was clear—the MNR must extend its activity to the strategic southern provinces, thereby discouraging Zimbabwe and Botswana from exporting its commodities through Maputo. To accomplish these broader objectives, South African officials agreed to provide large supplies of war material, including rockets, mortars and small arms as well as instructors "who will not only teach but also participate in attacks."

Mozambican field commanders with whom I spoke indicated that "Boers" regularly accompanied MNR bands in the central part of the country. When pressed for concrete examples, a young officer who had fought in Manica province revealed that his battalion discovered several dead European soldiers when it overran an MNR base at Chidogo. South African passports and other documents were captured at other MNR bases. Sara Muchalima, a twenty-six year old woman who had been kidnapped by the MNR, saw ten European advisors who, along with Dhlakama, were evacuated by helicopter shortly before Garagua fell.

Emphasis, however, is on South Africa training MNR forces at military bases in the Transvaal and providing supplies and logistical assistance to the guerrillas inside Mozambique. According to Mozambican field commanders in Tete and Manica provinces, MNR forces are regularly resupplied at night, and FRELIMO forces lack the communications and air support to prevent these air-drops. Mozambique's long coastline is also ideally suited for naval landings which are becoming more frequent. Captured MNR documents suggest that this is the preferred route—it is much cheaper for South Africa, and Mozambique's fledgling navy cannot patrol effectively.

Western diplomats in Maputo estimate the MNR numbers at about 5,000—appreciably lower than Dhlakama's claim of 17,000 armed soldiers. Most MNR recruits seem to have been coerced into joining. According to Sara Muchalima, "The

bandits came to my house and told my parents I had to go with them. My father refused, but they beat him up, tied my hands and with a gun to my head took me to their base at Garagua." John Burlison, a British ecologist held prisoner by the MNR for several months, reported seeing hundreds of forced recruits who were kept under armed guard.

Nevertheless, Mozambique's serious economic problems make MNR recruitment that much easier. Droughts, which the MNR attribute to the alienated ancestors, the Mozambican government's failure to provide sufficient support for the family farming sector, and the lack of consumer goods in parts of Manica, Sofala and Inhambane provide fertile ground for MNR overtures. So does the MNR's manipulation of tribal divisions and appeals to Shona chiefs, spirit mediums and "traditional" Shona values.

MNR Practices Terrorism

Whatever the initial attraction of these appeals, widescale plundering and increasing terrorism quickly evaporate support for the MNR and alienate the rural population which, above all else, wants to be left alone. Western missionaries living along the Mozambican-Zimbabwe border reported that in December 1980, the MNR launched a terrorist campaign around Espangabera in Manica "beheading Machel loyalists, abducting girls, and press-ganging young men into service." Peasants from Gaza who fled to Zimbabwe also spoke of repeated MNR atrocities. "At Madura, they came and demanded money and food. They accused some people of being informers for government forces and cut off the nose, lips and ears of a number of people. Then they told them to go and report to FRELIMO."

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Reports filtering in from the bush make it clear that these are not isolated acts by a few disaffected MNR members, but rather reflect the underlying strategy of an organization committed to banditry, marauding and terrorism. A captured bandit, Raque, admitted that he and his compatriots were ordered to rob and terrorize the population in order to discredit the government. "We cut off many people's ears," he said. "We sent them off and said, 'Now go to FRELIMO and say that we've been here.'" One high-ranking Western diplomat, who admitted that he was initially skeptical, now finds "reports of widespread MNR barbarism credible."

These tactics, together with the MNR's reliance on narrow tribal appeals directed exclusively at Shona-speaking peoples, only one of a dozen ethnic and cultural groups in the country, belie the MNR's claim that it is a nationalist movement of freedom fighters disillusioned with the FRELIMO's Party's Marxist strategy. Apart from its anti-communist rhetoric, it lacks any political program and has made no effort to organize the peasants in the areas in which it operates.

Nevertheless the MNR has played an important role trying to sabotage the SADCC (Southern African Development Coordinating Conference), the integrated regional alliance of Zimbabwe, Angola, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique forged in 1980 to break South Africa's economic hegemony. The roving bands of terrorists



Mozambique's President Samora Machel.
Sechaba

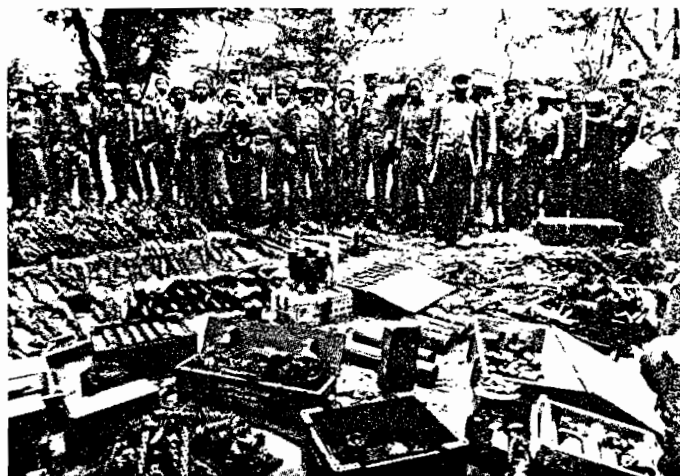
regularly cut the railroad lines between Maputo and Zimbabwe, harassed trains from Beira, Mozambique's second leading port to Zimbabwe, and periodically blocked rail traffic between Beira and Malawi. Pretoria's strategy is clear. Mozambique's ports serve as the international gateway for many of the landlocked SADCC countries—most notably Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia. Without a viable transportation and communication network all other forms of regional cooperation would be impractical and the SADCC would be aborted from the outset, thereby insuring South Africa's regional domination.

As the economic stakes increased, South African commandos no longer even bothered to maintain the facade as "instructors." In November 1981 marker buoys at the entrance of the Beira harbor were blown up. This was a sophisticated operation, which Western diplomats in Mozambique agreed was obviously beyond the technical capacity of the MNR. Similarly, South African commandos destroyed the strategic bridge across the Pungue River, blocking road communications to Beira and periodically mined the railroad lines linking that port city to Zimbabwe. It was in one such commando operation, according to *The Observer*, that a British mercenary, Lieutenant Alan Gingles, working for South African security forces, was killed when a mine detonated prematurely. At the end of December 1982 South African raiders destroyed thirty-four oil storage tanks in Beira valued at more than \$40 million, causing severe shortages in Zimbabwe.

At the same time that South Africa intensified its military pressure, it expanded its long-term objectives. Fearing both the increasing popularity of the African National Congress and the liberation movement's ability to attack strategic points within South Africa, Pretoria embarked upon a campaign to compel its neighbors not to provide any sanctuary or support for the freedom fighters. The first indication of this policy was the 1981 attack on the homes of South African refugees, some of whom were ANC members, living on the outskirts of Maputo. The August 1982 assassination of Ruth First, a leading member of the ANC and an outspoken critic of the apartheid regime, and increased South African border violations were other indications of Pretoria's intent. Most ominous was the explicit warning of South African Defense Minister Magnus Malan in August 1982 that his country might find it necessary to initiate a "Lebanese-type invasion" of Mozambique to rid it of "ANC terrorists."

Reagan's policies send a signal to Pretoria—that aggression against South Africa's neighbors is acceptable.

The brazen December 1982 attack against ANC homes in Maseru, Lesotho, coming precisely at the same moment when the Beira oil facilities were attacked, was meant as a clear warning to Mozambique that Maputo would be next. Indeed, in January the MNR initiated an offensive to capture or, at least, isolate southern Mozambique, including the capital. According to Sebastiao Mabote, Mozambique Chief of Staff, by April MNR forces had been routed. Coming at the time of the assassination of MNR Secretary General Christina in Pretoria by internal dissidents, the battlefield losses represented a major setback for the terrorist organization.



Captured South African weapons in Mozambique.
(Noticias, courtesy of Africa Report)

South African Attacks Escalate

It is against this backdrop that South Africa launched the recent air attack on Maputo on May 23. Ostensibly, it was in reprisal for an ANC attack which took place in Pretoria several days earlier. Although South Africa claimed that it struck at ANC military bases in Mozambique, Western observers remain skeptical. A group of reporters who toured the area unescorted reported "that all the victims appear to be civilians and that there was no evidence of hits connected with the ANC, and no sign of Mozambican missile installations," as the South Africans claimed. In fact, the area attack took place in Matola, Mozambique's principal industrial zone. The message was clear. Mozambique's fragile economy would be held hostage. Indeed, there is growing concern that the next target will be the Limpopo Valley, the nation's breadbasket, located within easy striking distance of the South African border.

Ironically, the air attack occurred less than a month after a high-level Mozambican delegation had met with South African officials at the border town of Komatiport. At this meeting, as in the case of an earlier meeting held last December, the Mozambicans reaffirmed their commitment to "promote peaceful coexistence with all countries, regardless of their social systems." They also gave assurances to South Africa that there were no ANC military bases in Mozambique, while acknowledging that they lacked the ability to patrol the long unmarked border which separates the two countries. Moreover, Western diplomats indicated that after the first encounter a number of ANC members and South African refugees left Maputo. According to rumors circulated in Maputo, their departure was part of an agreement in which the South Africans promised to reduce support for the MNR.

Whatever the case, Mozambique's leaders remain both firmly opposed to the racist system of apartheid and committed to providing sanctuary for South African refugees. Based on their own wartime experience, however, they remain convinced that revolutionary change in South Africa cannot come from the outside but only through the internal struggle of the South African people. For Mozambique's unflinching opposition to apartheid, its commitment to create a nonracial socialist society, and its efforts to forge an independent regional economy, the young nation will undoubtedly suffer many more South African attacks along with other front-line countries such as Zimbabwe and Angola.

To the extent that the Reagan administration chooses to view events in Southern Africa through the prism of the Cold War and adopts a pro-South African posture, its policies send a signal to Pretoria—a signal that aggression against South

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Africa's neighbors is acceptable. The failure of the Reagan administration to publicly and unequivocally condemn South African aggression against Mozambique and the reign of terror which the South African-backed MNR has inflicted on unarmed men, women, and children in Mozambique can only reinforce Pretoria's bellicose attitude. Finally, there are ominous signs that U.S. agencies are or were cooperating with the South African war-machine. The most relevant is the February 1981 exposure of CIA activities in Mozambique, including documented charges that American agents passed on information which facilitated the South African attack on the Maputo suburbs. Washington has never denied or refuted these charges. ■

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