

On the banks of a Lowveld river, the start of the long haul back

IN the Shangaan language *nkomat* means "the quiet, big cow that looks after the herd".

On Friday, on the banks of a river of that name, two nations entered into a peaceful accord. The *Nkomati* was taking care of its disparate herd.

It was March 16 — 23 years to the day since Dr Hendrik Verwoerd informed the Queen that South Africa was leaving the Commonwealth, placing the seal on our international isolation.

It's going to be a long haul back, but, if the road to international acceptance leads through Africa, it may have begun alongside the brown and sluggishly flowing *Nkomati* this week.

One had to be utterly

cynical or misanthropic, or both, to be unmoved by the extraordinary events of that day.

There was Samora Moises Machel, dazzlingly uniformed Marxist Marshal and President of the People's Republic of Mozam-

bique, saluting as the SAAF band played *Die Stem* in a blazingly hot piece of no man's land on the Lowveld border.

There was Mr P W Botha, quietly suited and every bit the avuncular boerediplomat, inspecting Mozam-

bique's impressively turned-out national guard and accepting a flower of peace from a small black child.

Only a few months ago our aircraft were flying east across that same frontier to bomb ANC bases in Maputo.

Only a few months (weeks?) ago ANC cadres were sneaking westwards across that border to prime their bombs in South African cities.

The bellicose rhetoric was flying in both directions.

But today was different. Assembled on two temporary pavilions overlooking the red, hastily levelled parade ground were the guests of the two leaders.

Eastwards sat the luminaries from Maputo, invited by President Machel. The proximity of so many Marx-

ists, including diplomats from the Soviet Union, North Korea, East Germany and Cuba, attracted the curious binocular gaze of VIPs

on the South African stand in the west.

As his guests, Mr Botha had assembled virtually every mover and shaker in South African society. Crowned corporate heads, bankers and heavyweight eminences of every stamp were visibly exhilarated by seeing a little bit of history being made.

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Last Friday there could not have been an important board meeting in Johannesburg or a quorum at a control board in Pretoria.

Their smart suits (why on earth did Foreign Affairs stipulate dark gear?) crumpled by sweat, they engaged

in cheerful banter when the statesmen lingered longer than planned in the white coach up on the hill.

They began keeping score as soldiers fainted in the heat on the parade ground.

First to fall was a Mozambican trooper. Then one of ours. One all.

As the Mozambicans pulled ahead to 6-4 in the fainting stakes, one corporate wag quipped: "It's because our chaps don't get enough international competition."

The banter ended as the two leaders appeared on the neat pagoda to complete the ceremonial business of the day.

"Historic" is a much-

abused word these days, but this, clearly, was the real thing. It seemed entirely appropriate that the men and women who largely shape South African affairs should be present at this moment.

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There, among those at the pagoda to witness the signing, were Mr P W Botha and General Constand Viljoen. It was the former's artfulness at diplomacy and the latter's skill at war which made this moment possible.

On the pavilion, pennies were offered for their thoughts.

Guards of honour were inspected, the khaki-clad President Machel's slightly

swaggering body language compared with Mr Botha's homier, but dignified, style.

Red and white balloons marked "peace" were still drifting overhead into the Lowveld from the Mozambique pavilion as the crowd drifted into sweltering marquees for cooling beer, warm wine, prawns and kreen.

Conversation was animated, the talk was of history and of new beginnings. Even the Conservative Party's Mr Tom Langley seemed to enjoy himself hugely in the company of some new Mozambican friends.

Outside, soldiers from the two countries clinked beer bottles and exchanged gifts and jokes.

As Mr Botha's hot but still exhilarated guests set off for the train-bus-plane link which would transport them back to Jan Smuts with Madison-Avenue efficiency, they watched soldiers of the Mozambique national guard trooping back towards their border.

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Most of them carried a bottle of Grand Mousseux wrapped inside their commemorative copies of the *Nkomati Accord*.

Like the river flowing slowly eastwards in the valley below, it all seemed very symbolic indeed.

Next stop, Namibia?



By
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