

Mozambique Rail Link Cut

The Rhodesian Government announced on February 27th that all rail traffic with the Mozambique port of Maputo (formerly Lourenco Marques) had been halted. The Minister of Transport, Mr. Roger Hawkins, announced the closure of the railway, the country's main export and import route, following the arrest by Mozambique authorities earlier the same day of 16 Rhodesian railway workers.

According to the Rhodesians, no reasons have been given for the arrests of the 16 men, who include all 14 Rhodesian officials at the border station of Malvernia and two train crew. It was, however, being suggested that the men, eight blacks and eight whites, were arrested by the local Frelimo commander in the Malvernia area.

Although the Rhodesian Government appeared to be playing down the gravity of the closure, suggesting that the arrests might be the result of a misunderstanding, there was no sign of a speedy release of the men. The *Times* noted on March 1st that there was growing concern that Frelimo's action might have been in retaliation against the earlier border incursion by Rhodesian forces.

There has been considerable diversion of Rhodesian trade from the Mozambique routes since the Portuguese coup in 1974 and this has accelerated greatly since Mozambique's independence in June 1975 (p. 3654). Estimates vary, but it is thought that at least 50 per cent of Rhodesian trade now uses the two rail-links with South Africa.

So far, despite widespread expectations that it would do so at the time of independence, Mozambique has not applied economic sanctions against Rhodesia. This, it is felt, is partly because the Frelimo Government remains worried at the implications of such a move for its own already stretched security forces. It is also, however, because trade with Rhodesia is financially beneficial to Mozambique. Food imports from Rhodesia are believed to be substantial, while the railway and port operations earn useful foreign exchange. However, the Frelimo Government has always publicly supported sanctions and Ministers have indicated that they will impose them when they feel the time is ripe. (FT 28/2, TT 1/3)

The halting of rail traffic to Maputo and the increased guerrilla activity on the border has brought a real possibility that Rhodesia could soon find itself involved in a direct confrontation with Mozambique, particularly if its forces undertake strikes against the guerrilla bases over the border. Earlier in February President Samora Machel said that Mozambique would retaliate. Despite a denial by the Rhodesian Minister of Defence, it is believed that Russian tanks have been landed at Beira and Russian advisers are helping the Frelimo Government.

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