

Zimbabwe – battlefield or proving ground

Zimbabwe will be the battlefield on which southern Africa's destiny will be decided in the Eighties.

South Africa will provide the driving force behind the defensive alliance that will emerge in response to the continuing, and growing, Soviet offensive against the sub-continent. Mozambique and Angola will be the most enthusiastic agents for furthering the objectives of the offensive — while struggling to contain the internal opposition to their Marxist regimes. Zambia — with President Kaunda probably the region's most likely candidate for assassination in the Eighties — will continue to be buffeted between the opposing forces, its government unable morally or physically to act decisively one way or another.

But Zimbabwe is where it will all be happening, where the war will be decided for southern Africa and ultimately for West and East, and where, not least, white and black on the subcontinent will discover whether they have a viable future — together.

On the face of it the country enters the Eighties in a far stronger position than most would have thought possible even six months ago. A ceasefire has been agreed upon, sanctions have been lifted by Britain and the United States and British recognition of the country's independence is a formality after the elections, probably in March.

But the calm is that of the eye of the storm rather than its abatement. Nobody believes that the Marxist Patriotic Front will meekly lay down its arms if it should lose the election. It only agreed to the ceasefire because Britain threatened to cut it out of the settlement altogether. The chances are that it will continue to do all it can to prevent an election from being held at all, without putting itself totally in the wrong diplomatically and giving Britain the opportunity to be finally rid of its problem by withdrawing and recognising Bishop Abel Muzorewa's government.



Muzorewa: showing the way

With the issues at stake for it, Moscow cannot allow the PF to accept an election defeat. Should that happen — and going by the outcome of the last election it probably will — the war will go on.

But what counts is that the country will be in a far stronger position to prosecute the war — and rebuild its economy — in the years to come. Trade and investment prospects will improve dramatically. South Africa will feel freer, and under Prime Minister P W Botha will almost certainly wish to provide economic and military aid openly and in greater volume. The visible signs of improvement will both raise the morale of whites and blacks internally and weaken the resolve of the terrorists.

On the other hand the very existence of a stronger Zimbabwe will cause the Soviet bloc to increase its military commitment. The conflict will get worse before it gets better. How it will end is the most profound question to be answered in the Eighties.