

Block



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Rhodesia: A Strike At the Lifeline

"There are no massacres or bloodbaths, no massive terrorist force buildups, no panic or hysteria, no queues of people leaving the country. Journalists can travel safely with no fears of bomb explosions." That was the confident message of a propaganda letter recently printed up by Prime Minister Ian Smith's white minority regime in Rhodesia for circulation abroad. Last week that confidence was somewhat shaken. Apparently slipping across the Mozambique border, black terrorists roamed 85 miles inside Rhodesia, killed three whites, wounded two, and severed the only direct railroad link to South Africa. It was the deepest penetration of Rhodesia by black nationalists since they began raids from Mozambique in 1972.

Land Mine. The band of 20 guerrillas, dressed in uniforms similar to those of Rhodesian security guards, began their rampage on Easter Sunday. Stationing themselves on the Great North Road at a point some 70 miles north of the South African border, they began stopping cars and robbing the occupants. One of the robberies was interrupted by the arrival of two motorcycles, each carrying two white South Africans. Possibly mistaking the newcomers for plainclothes security forces, the guerrillas immediately opened fire, killing three male cyclists and wounding their 19-year-old woman companion. At the same time, the guerrillas detonated a grenade atop a land mine placed under the tracks of the Rhodesia-South Africa railroad—just as a freight train was passing. The blast derailed the train and destroyed a section of the track. Three days later, terrorists fired at a farmer in a passing car, wounding him in the shoulder.

The railroad—which is now patrolled by security guards on foot—was back in operation within 24 hours. But the terrorist attack will probably be costly to Rhodesia's already struggling economy; it could discourage visitors from South Africa, who contribute heavily to Rhodesia's \$40 million-a-year tourist industry. The incidents also clearly illustrated the vulnerability of Rhodesia's lifelines to South Africa, which have become even more important since Mozambique closed its borders with Rhodesia last month (see following story). In fact, Salisbury now depends on the South African rail link for all of its oil and ammunition and most of its imports.

Threatening Calls. Usually complacent Rhodesian whites were shaken by the incident. Declared a bank clerk in Salisbury who had just returned from military-reserve duty on the border where Rhodesian troops are deployed in force: "This is just not possible. We're supposed to have everything buttoned up." Others vented their anger on black militants. Elliott Gabellah, who heads the external wing of the African National Council inside Rhodesia, appealed for police protection after he received several threatening phone calls.

South Africa, too, was aroused over the murder of its nationals. Prime Minister John Vorster, who has been urging Smith to negotiate a settlement on black majority rule, warned the terrorists not to go too far. Killing innocent tourists, he said, "can only unleash forces which could have far-reaching effects." Increasingly, South Africans were worried about the growing Rhodesian crisis. Editorialized Johannesburg's Rand Daily Mail: "Having let slip one chance after another of reaching an accommodation with more moderate black leaders, Rhodesia's whites seem to have made the tragic choice of facing black nationalism over the barrel of a gun rather than the conference table. The downhill road toward a race war in Rhodesia is becoming increasingly slippery with blood."

Smith's intransigence—and how to deal with it—will be a top-priority matter for discussion this week when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger begins a two-week swing through the black African nations of Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Zaire, Ghana, Liberia and Senegal. Before leaving Washington, Kissinger said he would stress both U.S. commitment to a policy of black majority rule in Rhodesia and U.S. determination to prevent further Soviet or Cuban involvement in African affairs.

But time may be growing short for a peaceful transition to black rule in Rhodesia. Across the 800-mile-long border with Mozambique, 3,000 armed, trained and increasingly bold black Rhodesian guerrillas stand ready to attack. At least 5,000 more, in a half-dozen camps, are being trained by Chinese and Mozambican advisors to make deadly forays back into their white-dominated homeland.



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