Bridge attack demonstrates vulnerability of pipeline

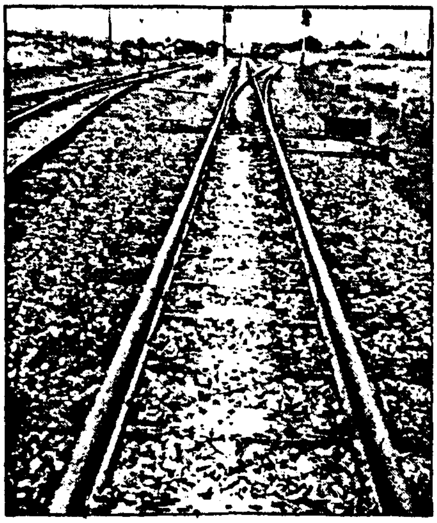
The October attack on the Beira-Umtali road and rail link drew attention to the vulnerability of the oil pipeline which is to reopen for commercial use this year. ALAN RAKE reports.

The night after Ken Scheepers, the managing director of Lonrho, told pressmen that the much troubled Beira to Umtali oil pipeline would be finished on time, in December, Mozambican Resistance Movement (MRM) guerrillas blew the Pungwe river bridge, at a spot 54km from Beira. It was the night of 28 October. The pipeline, still full of crude oil, was thrown clear of its mountings on the side of the bridge, but surprisingly was not fractured or damaged in any way though the bridge itself collapsed in the middle.

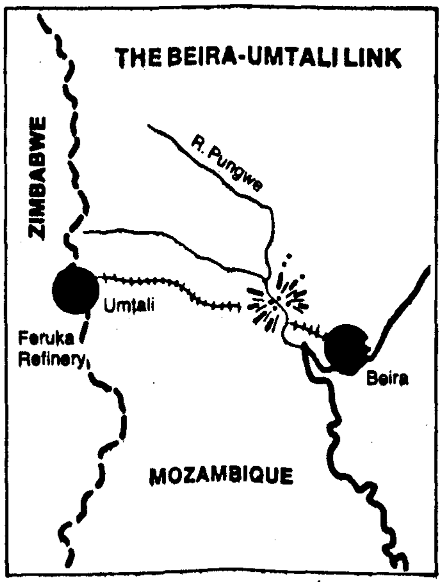
The crude oil has all been pumped out of the western section of the pipeline and stored in the Feruka refinery tank farm in Zimbabwe. The oil from the eastern half of the line had already been pumped in the other direction towards Beira where it is being stored, awaiting probable transport to the Shell refinery at Maputo.

Work on the pipeline is now complete, after 80km have been replaced and a further 40km have been examined, repaired and re-wrapped. It was due to come on stream in December, in time to alleviate a serious petrol shortage that has developed in Zimbabwe. The plan is to use it for refined petroleum, as the Feruka refinery, owned by the CAPREV consortium of oil companies, is years away from being rehabilitated. There are even doubts that it will ever be reopened, so costly and extensive is the work involved.

But now that the bridge is down, Lonrho engineers have to find another way of securing the pipeline across or through the river. The Minister of Industry and Energy Development, Dr Simba Makoni, says that the pipeline will still be opened on time, but our information is that there will be a further delay, at least until January or February. Meanwhile, Zimbabwean motorists will have to suffer.



Transport is SADCC's top priority, and also its Achille's heel.



The blowing of the bridge reveals the vulnerability of the pipeline, which is buried only a metre deep and is exposed at numerous river crossings, pump stations and valve shut-off points.

Lonrho officials are keen to stress that it was the bridge and road communications which were the target of the MRM, not the line itself, but no-one can say exactly what MRM's aims were. It is known that the movement is backed by South Africa and there is every indication that the broad objective is to destabilise the Zimbabwean and Mozambican governments. A pipeline full of refined petroleum will be a tempting target.

The Zimbabwe and Mozambique defence authorities have assured their governments that is is possible "within reasonable limits" to assure the safety of the line, but sceptics point out that it would be almost impossible to guard the entire length of 288km. However, even if there were further attempts, not all the petroleum would be lost. Damage could be confined to the distance between two of the 25 valves. Lonrho is now seriously considering installing automatic shut-off valves in place of those already installed.

The tariff for the use of the pipeline has still not been settled, nor has the question of compensation to Mozambique for the loss of the oil traffic that it is currently handling by rail. Another historical problem is the question of the ownership of the crude jointly pipe. Theoretically, it is owned by the consortium of oil companies which form CAPREV, but in 1976, when Mozambique closed the border with Zimbabwe, it confiscated all Rhodesian property including the crude lying in the pipeline.

However, Ken Scheepers thinks that it is "inconceivable that the line should not be used" when it is finally ready.

The refined petroleum will be pumped up from the pump station at Maforga near Beira. At the Zimbabwe end it will be handled by the Zimbabwe Oil Procurement Consortium (ZOPCO) which was set up by the government. It will distribute the petrol to individual oil companies. The advantages to Zimbabwe once the line is in operation will be immense. The petrol will arrive quicker and transport costs will be considerably reduced. It will also relieve the overcrowded railways system of a large percentage of its traffic which can then be diverted to other uses.

The port of Beira can only take oil tankers of up to 15,000 tonnes but it is possible to work with vessels of this size. Already Malawi and the north of Mozambique are supplied by tankers of this size. Zimbabwe's larger market will simply mean more frequent calls by the tankers to the two tank lines on the general wharf ■