

Mozambicans learn how to live with the silent war

From Joseph Hanlon
in Maputo

MOZAMBIQUE is learning to live with a war that now affects one-third of the country and seems likely to continue for some time.

South African backing has made the Mozambique National Resistance much more than a group of "armed bandits," as Frelimo dismissively dubbed them. But the MNR has failed to bring the country to its knees and Frelimo still retains control, even in some areas that have come under repeated MNR attack.

A new sawmill on a hillside near Chimolo, in central Mozambique, is one symbol of the struggle. Built with £10 million from Sweden, it is part of one of Mozambique's most important development projects, and opened on schedule on December 4 despite repeated MNR attacks.

The sawmill is surrounded by sturdy fences and a military guard. Swedish technicians leave the compound in armed convoys, and a Swedish army major is there to organise their protection. The sawmill director is armed and in uniform. Like other managers and government officials in the area, he has been given military training.

Sawmill workers, too, are being trained and many are armed. But it is not enough. One week after the official opening, a lorry carrying sawmill workers was machine-gunned by the MNR. Five

workers were killed and 25 injured.

The railway from Zimbabwe to Beira passes beside the sawmill. Trains run regularly, although they are frequently attacked and often carry a wagon-load of soldiers with machineguns. Several hundred Zimbabwe troops are now in the area to protect the railway and oil pipeline.

In southern Mozambique, there seems to be more of a stalemate. The MNR pushed south nearly to the Limpopo river and the city of Xai Xai in early 1982, but the advance was stopped. Slowly, an area north of the river perhaps 30 miles wide, has been cleared. Schools and health posts are being reopened there, and local militias are being trained and armed.

A huge area further north remains insecure. The railway linking Maputo to Zimbabwe is closed. The rich coastal area of Inhambane is inaccessible, which means that little fruit and few coconuts reach Maputo markets. Hama Thai, a highly respected military commander in the wars against Portugal and Rhodesia, has been pulled out of civilian life as mayor of Maputo and returned to active service as Inhambane military commander, in an effort to break the deadlock.

In Zambezia province in the north, the big MNR push across the border from Malawi towards Quelimane on the coast seems to have faltered. During September and October, MNR bands swept across the province unopposed. They

attacked two large towns, Gurue and Milange, burned dozens of lorries, and destroyed several tea and cotton factories. By mid-October, economic activity in the province was paralysed and most foreign technicians were evacuated.

But MNR activity stopped as suddenly as it started although two districts bordering Malawi remain unsafe and roads are periodically mined in other parts of the province. Business, however, is slowly resuming; foreign crews have returned to build roads and electricity lines and the technicians have returned to Gurue and Milange.

The relative calm in Zambezia may be due to the destruction of a large MNR base on November 2, when the Mozambican army freed six captured Bulgarians. Diplomatic pressure on Malawi to stop South Africa establishing rear bases there for the MNR may also have helped.

About one-third of the country is now affected by the war. Although the MNR has not occupied parts of the country and set up "liberated zones," it does have effective military control in some areas, stopping most traffic and making it impossible to provide government services.

Beira, Mozambique's second largest city, is under siege. People do not go far outside the city. In recent months, the MNR has cut the electricity

four times and the water once. Buses and trains to the city have been hit.

Mozambique has sharply increased its military call-up, and many officers have been moved from desk jobs in Maputo to the battlefield.

Mozambique cannot afford to buy the helicopters and other hardware needed for a traditional anti-guerrilla war. Thus Frelimo is concentrating on arming the people — training local militias to defend villages

When it tries to mobilise people against the "armed bandits," Frelimo has imposed a blackout on information. Little is said officially. The local press and radio are barred from publishing anything about the war except official statements and they are rarely issued.

The hunger for details of the war is palpable. There are queues to buy the army weekly, *Combat*, because it sometimes contains items about victorious battles. Radio South Africa and the MNR radio are drawing an increasing audience because they provide details of MNR raids.

Without official information, the most exaggerated rumours and MNR claims gain credibility. In October, Mia Couto, the editor of the government newspaper, *Noticias*, published a front-page column saying that the only antidote to these rumours was information. "If silence is our only answer, we cannot bemoan the effects caused by enemy information," he commented.

The reply came in November with the detention for several days of Carlos Cardoso, editor of the Mozambique Information Agency