

# Frontline troops, MNR rebels in skirmish

Argus Africa  
News Service

JOHANNESBURG. — A skirmish between Zimbabwean troops and anti-Frelimo guerrillas in Mozambique has underlined the growing danger of the rebels clashing with the forces of several frontline states.

Though otherwise inconsequential, the shoot-out appears to have been the first acknowledged contact between the Mozambique National Resistance and troops of a Mozambican ally drawn into the conflict to protect its economic interests.

When the three companies of Zimbabwean soldiers were sent to Mozambique in mid-November they joined a force of Tanzanian troops, officially estimated at several thousand, sent by President Julius Nyerere to reinforce the Frelimo forces.

## No evidence

Two other Mozambican neighbours, Zambia and Malawi, are believed to have been asked by President Samora Machel's Government to send troops, though there is no evidence yet that any have arrived.

However, in a recent radio broadcast an MNR spokesman claimed that Zambian troops had already been deployed.

The skirmish in question took place on Friday evening when guerrillas launched a mortar attack on a pumping station about halfway along the pipeline that carries

most of Zimbabwe's fuel supplies from Beira to Mutare (formerly Umtali).

## Beaten off

Before they could do any damage the attackers were beaten off by Zimbabwean troops stationed at Mafora to protect the 288 km fuel lifeline.

Though the possibility of Zimbabwean military involvement in the Mozambican conflict has been discussed for years, the Prime Minister, Mr Robert Mugabe, is believed to have been forced into taking action after the MNR blew up the Mafora pipeline pumping station on October 11. At the same time, the MNR kidnapped three Portuguese technicians and their families.

## Released

The Portuguese were later released, but maintenance workers refused to go back to the pipeline without protection.

The MNR radio station Radio Free Africa (or the Voice of the Hyena to those on the receiving end) has at least twice warned that the movement would attack Zimbabwean targets if the Mugabe Government continued to provide military support to Mozambique.

Without the Mozambican ports, landlocked Zambia must rely on South Africa to help to shift the huge "overflow" from the inefficient Tanzam railway to Dar es Salaam.