

SOUTH AFRICA'S HIDDEN WAR

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The struggle in Mozambique between the government of Samora Machel and the insurgents of the South African-backed Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) is a hidden war, virtually unreported except when a foreign technician is kidnapped or when oil storage facilities or railway lines are destroyed.

There are few set piece battles and no front lines in this war that now affects all but one of Mozambique's 10 provinces. The evidence is rather in the form of shot-up vehicles, burned-out stores and mutilated people with ears, lips or breasts cut off as the rebels pursue a policy of economic sabotage and instilling fear into the people.

The MNR, which is believed to have about 10,000 guerrillas in the country, has not proclaimed any specific ideology, its *raison d'être* seems mainly to oppose Machel's Marxist government with a vague appeal to capitalism and to a return to more traditional ways, such as polygamy and tribal chieftainship.

"There is no evidence of people rallying to support the MNR," a Western diplomat says. "Nor are many in the rural areas particularly attracted by the government" now that the fervour of independence eight years ago has faded.

To the countries of southern Africa, the war is part of a massive South African campaign to destabilise its neighbours — to prevent successful black rule from providing a positive example to its powerless black majority. They cite the occupation of southern Angola, support for the MNR, attacks on Lesotho and economic pressure on Zimbabwe.

No Western diplomat interviewed in Maputo questions South Africa's involvement with the Mozambican resistance. "Everybody takes for granted South African support for the MNR," one ambassador said.

The United States, which has the warmest relations with South Africa of the major Western countries, has joined in the criticism. The State Department says the MNR "receives the bulk of its support from South Africa."

However, South African goods have been discovered at MNR bases captured by Mozambican troops and residents of border towns have told of white Afrikaans-speaking troops being involved in attacks.

The rebellion is led by Afonso Dhlakama, a black who was expelled from Frelimo in a 1974 anti-corruption drive, and Orlando Christina, a Portuguese. Both are believed to live in South Africa, but announcements of kidnappings or battles are usually made in Lisbon by

Evo Fernandes, who is in charge of MNR publicity.

Apparently a key aim of South Africa in supporting the MNR is to force Mozambique to restrain the ANC.

The demand was spelled out in a meeting in December between the South African Foreign Minister Botha and the Mozambican Security Minister Maj. Gen. Jacinto Veloso in the South African border town of Komatipoort, the first time a member of the ruling Politburo has openly met a senior South African official.

"Thequid pro quo is there — there's a linkage between South African support for MNR and ANC activities," a Western diplomat privy to the talks said.

Nevertheless, Mozambique recently has been seeking to broaden its friendships beyond the Soviet bloc and there has been a noticeable warming towards Western Europe and the United States. But the hidden war could put that opening towards the West at peril. If the conflict worsens, Mozambique would undoubtedly have to turn once more to the East for increased military help, polarising southern Africa along East-West lines.

In December some of the heaviest fighting of the war occurred in Maputo province in the south as thousands of guerrillas entered from South Africa's Kruger National Park and others pushed toward the Limpopo River in Gaza.

The Army repulsed the MNR in Maputo and then launched the Gaza offensive, somewhat turning the tide. Mabote estimates that there are up to 1,000 MNR fighters in each province. More than 300 surrendered in the central provinces in January, he said.

With no air support and only a 20,000-men army facing about 10,000 guerrillas spread around the country, Mozambique "has no chance of eliminating the MNR overall," the Western military specialist said. "The army can concentrate in one area," he said, especially regions close to Maputo like Gaza, "and eliminate the guerrillas, but to what cost elsewhere?"

With the military victory in Gaza, cholera inoculation teams have recently been able to penetrate the worst hit areas to try to combat the war-related epidemic. But fear is the main disease. In some rural areas people do not sleep in their houses or huts but go to the bush every night.

Machel has been careful, however, not to turn away from his arms supplier, the

Soviet Union, with which Mozambique has a friendship treaty. He went to Moscow last month, the first African president to visit the new Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov.

"Mozambique is widening its circle of friends without walking away from its existing relationships," a western diplomat said.

Despite his proud marshal's uniform, often accompanied by a holster and pistol, and his bombastic language, Machel has been one of the prime movers for ending hostilities in southern Africa.

British diplomats readily acknowledge that Machel was a key factor in the success of the 1979 negotiations at Lancaster House that finally produced majority rule for neighbouring Zimbabwe. Machel leaned on his friend Robert Mugabe, then a Mozambique-based guerrilla leader and now prime minister of Zimbabwe, to take part in the negotiations and finally to sign the agreement.

After Mugabe's election, Machel warned him not to emulate Mozambique where almost all the whites fled at independence, sending the economy into a tailspin. Fewer than 45 per cent of the whites have left Zimbabwe in the three years since independence.

US diplomats also acknowledge that Machel has been a moderating influence on Angolan President Eduardo dos Santos in the tortuous negotiations over independence for Namibia.

The opening to the western nations, particularly the United States, is aimed at getting them to call off the South Africans and thus end the MNR threat. How successful that policy is remains to be seen.

The rally represented the other aspect of Machel's policy: restoring public confidence in the ruling party, Frelimo, and improving the economy. "The MNR has found fertile soil in Mozambique because of economic disillusionment with Frelimo," a western diplomat said.

A number of Mozambican officials, sometimes even fervent Marxists, are sharply critical of the system.

Some of the problems have nothing to do with ideology but are common to Africa, such as giving priority to the cities.

To its credit, there is a great deal of self-criticism within the government, unlike in many African countries. Machel is at the forefront in criticising his own government.

At last month's People's Assembly, the Mozambican equivalent of a parliament, he attacked economists for unrealistic plans and inflated targets because they never got into the rural areas. There are limits to the criticism, however. Nobody criticises Machel or the Marxist system itself.